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by W. Edmunds Claussen

COFFIN IN THE SKY

by J. E. Hungerford

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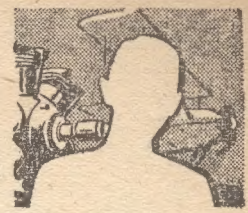

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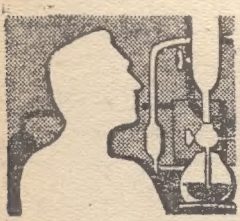

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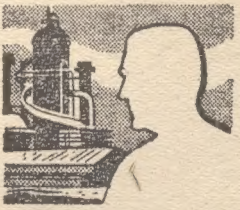

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ALL STORIES NEW
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FAMOUS WESTERN

TEN COMPLETE STORIES

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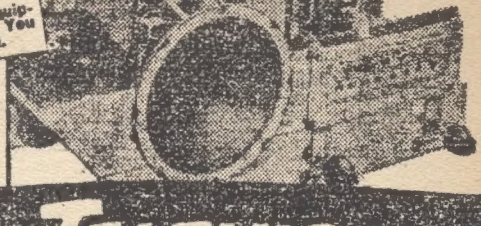

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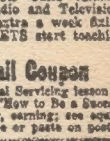

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REDUCE

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☐ I will pay postman $4.98 plus postage.
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EACH ADDITIONAL CARAT $24.

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NOTE: If you don't know ring size, send this strip of paper. ALL PRICES INCLUDE TAX!

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★ FEATURE NOVEL

By Allan K. Echols

Dupere had been fast with his gun, and his palmed cards—but not fast enough with either!

"You're asking whether I killed men for the satisfaction of it; that question has been troubling me, Asa, just as it is troubling these people, now...They hired me because a man who could not protect himself, who could not get in the first shot, could not have done things that had to be done. The odds were against a lawman who could not, or did not, shoot faster than the men who were running wild around here. And when I knew such trash would shoot, I shot first!"

THE TWO shots rang out above all the other sounds in the big saloon room. Two puffs of bluish gray smoke floated upward, separated only by the width of a poker table. They shaped themselves lazily into flexible rings as they rose toward the low roof, leaving the stuffy air of

NEW GRAVES
For Hush Creek

the crowded room thick with their acrid smell, and leaving the packed crowd of gamblers, pilgrims, and percentage girls suddenly frozen silent with the sudden shock of it.

Jode Pugh's deadfall was accustomed to the sound of guns. A rambling structure of mud-chinked pine logs, it stood on the bank of Hush Creek at the point where the creek left the mountains and started twisting across the broad flats of sagegrass in the southeast corner of Indian territory. Built beside the trail that led from Texas up through the Territory into Kansas, it drew custom from the pilgrims and traildrivers who came through the cut in the Kiamish

Mountains, and from the wild bunch who lived in the dark fringes of the mountains, where the Federal officers were not eager to penetrate.

Rough and tough as the place was, accustomed to the sound of guns and the clink of fighting knifes, its customers thought little of human life. But there was something about the awful suddenness of this fight, about the instant finality of its conclusion, that brought a stunned silence in the packed room.

In the dead quiet, people stood frozen. The sound of poker chips was stilled; the guitar and fiddle players sat holding their instruments as though the sound of the shots had turned them to stone.

The gambler who had died at the sound of the shot lay with his head buried in poker chips and money, his smoking gun in his right hand on the table, his left hand hanging loose at his side.

The man who had killed him had got up from his chair and stood calmly holding the gun that had outshot the gambler's weapon, moving his eyes alertly from man to man in the room.

The other players at the table, and at the other tables, sat immobile, the fact of the killing sinking into their consciousness only gradually. Satisfied that the shooting was over for a minute, the man who had killed the gambler spoke, and his voice was without anger or excitement. He was addressing the men at the table with the dead man, the table at which he had been playing. "You gentlemen saw what he did. He palmed his hole card and replaced it with one he had hidden in his other hand. There they are."

There was a tight silence for a long moment, and the listeners seemed hesitant to agree with him, but rather waiting for the next act of what they expected to be an unfinished piece of business. Jode Pugh, who owned the place, had left a group he was talking to, and was now approaching.

Pugh was a man who had a name to be reckoned with. Thick-bodied and

thick-necked, short and built like a beer keg with legs, he stood across the poker table from the young man with the gun, giving him a look of surprise that conveyed the idea that he could not conceive of a man so foolish as to come into his place and shoot up one of his house gamblers.

Or it might have been that he was surprised that any pilgrim, such as this young sodbuster in front of him, could or would dare to match his guns with Henry Dupere, the dead gambler. Dupere was as fast with his gun as he was reputed to be with a palmed card and —up to now—that had been fast enough for this deadfall.

PUGH GAVE careful attention to the young man before him. The man who had outshot Dupere could hardly have been more than thirty years old, just an average-sized and average-looking hombre, if you didn't pay too much attention to the eyes which had a deceptive blue blandness encircled by sun crinkles over his face. "Glad to know you, Dallas," cheeks.

"What was your objection to the way we run our games?" Pugh asked with a cold politeness that was all cynicism. "Were Dupere's fingernails dirty, or something?"

"I wouldn't stop at his fingernails," the young man smiled.

"Just what was there about his appearance that did not please you?"

"The appearance of that Joker after he'd already drawn his five cards. It makes me nervous when a magician starts pulling cards out of the air to

improve his hand—makes me feel that there is something just a bit smelly about the game. And then again, I'm an advocate of free speech, with which principle your houseman didn't seem to be in full agreement. In short, when I objected to him helping himself to a new hole card, he pulled his gun. I took that as a hint that he objected to my complaint; I overruled his objections."

"I haven't done my voting yet," Pugh said coldly. "And I generally cast the deciding vote in these diggings."

"That's fine, then," the young man answered. "In that case, you will decide to return my money. In all, I invested eighteen hundred dollars in Dupere's magic lessons, and you can just reimburse me in cash."

"Well, now," Pugh bellowed. "I will have to think that over. Quite a long time."

"No, there is nothing to think over; you will just have to pay me now, and save the suspense you would undergo."

"Young man," Pugh said, wearying of following the indirections of his customer. "You have made a mistake. A *grave* one! You don't buy into a poker game on approval around here. There are no refunds."

"*You* have made the grave mistake," the young man said; "there is going to be a refund—now."

Pugh's eyes went around the room, casually, as if he were lost in speculation. His look stopped one moment on Benny Wister, the shadowy gunman who was usually loafing inconspicuously around the place on crowded nights. At a look from Pugh, Wister had a way of looming out of nowhere, saying a few words to the person Pugh was interested in, and starting the fireworks. An insulting word, and before Pugh's guest could realize that there was a third party in the brawl, Wister had defended his honor, and the man Pugh had marked was ready for burial.

Now Wister got up from his own card game and came over, slowly, inconspicuously, a faint smile on his face, his two guns tied down and flapping lightly against his thighs. Those here tonight from back in the hills knew this play, and they tightened their nerves against the moment a show they had seen a dozen times would be repeated.

Wister pushed through the crowd that had backed into a big circle around the poker table with the dead man lying over it and with Pugh and the young pilgrim from the wagon train watching each other alertly.

Wister came into the open circle in a casual manner and stopped beside the man who gave the orders. He had a soft smile on his face, marking some hidden amusement, and there was almost a touch of humor in behind the slate gray eyes which hid the little gunman's thoughts from the world.

He twisted a turkey-quill toothpick in his gold-toothed mouth for a moment, then spoke to the young man. "Howdy, Marshal. You met Jode Pugh, yet? Jode, this is Jeff Dallas, I reckon about the famousest Deputy U. S. Marshal that ever wore a star here in the territory. Dallas, meet Jode Pugh; Jode is kind of the unofficial mayor and postmaster of the Kiamish Mountains. You men ought to get to know each other."

2

JODE PUGH'S jaw dropped, and his eyes searched the floor while he put his mind to the problem of this new situation. When he looked up he had what he used for a smile on his face. "Glad to know you, Dallas," he said. "Why the devil didn't you say who you was? I'm a man that believes in law and order and if you caught my dealer cheating, then you done the right thing in calling his hand. How much did you say you lost to that damned thief?"

"Eighteen hundred. Count those chips, if you want to."

"Count all them chips, when you've already told me how much you lost? Don't be loco! You say it's eighteen hundred, it's eighteen hundred; now just hold everything."

Pugh shoved his way roughly through the crowd and demanded money from the bartender, who got it out of a big iron safe and handed it to him. Returning, he counted the money out to Dallas on the table beside the dead man's head.

He looked up after he had finished, spotted a couple of men and shouted, "Ed, you and Dill take Dupere out and bury him. I ain't got no use for a crooked gambler." He looked up at Dallas. "Won't let one in my house if I know he's crooked."

Dallas pocketed his money and gave Pugh an answering smile. "Glad to hear that," he said; "we're going to be around here for a while."

"Not a bad place for a settlement," Pugh returned. "I hope the farmers do well. I'd like to see a booming town around here. It's got everything, grass, water, timber. Good men can do all right here. You brought 'em in, I hear."

"Yeah. I led 'em in."

"Be around a while with them?"

"I think so."

"That's good. I'll see you around."

Dallas searched the room with a keen glance as he walked out of the place. He studied the faces of the men here—those who had not come with his own group—and he did not like what he saw. Two or three of these men turned their heads away from him as he passed, and he knew that they had recognized him as he had recognized them. Wanted men, men with a price on their heads. They had fled to the corner of the territory where the wild hills could give them refuge, where few officers would risk coming.

●

JEFF DALLAS reached the nearest campfire, around which there were perhaps a dozen of the pilgrims he had led to this place. They and their wives were sitting and talking. They became suddenly silent when he came up, and this fact registered on his mind and set him wondering. These people who had been his friends during the trip seemed suddenly embarrassed at his presence, and he got the idea that they had been talking about him.

He looked around the circle in the firelight hoping to find Mona Hartshorne, but she was not there, nor was her father, Asa, who by virtue of his age and wisdom had come to be a kind of elder statesman for the group. "Has anyone seen the Hartshornes?" he asked.

They were all silent except for David Mosely who nodded his head to the left and said, "They went down toward their wagon."

Dallas turned to go when Mosely added, "Heard you had some trouble up there at that dump. Serious?"

Dallas knew then that they had been talking about his killing the gambler. "Why," he said thoughtfully, "Not very serious; there's just one less crook about."

He found Mona Hartshorne and her father sitting in rawhide-bottom rocking chairs in the darkness beside their wagon, apparently just soaking in the sweet spring breeze that flowed down off the higher reaches, and watching the millions of jeweled fireflies blanketing the sagegrass below.

He squatted and rolled a cigarette after he had spoken to them. The old man restuffed his pipe, and the match he held to it lighted up a seamed face in a white beard. Asa Hartshorne had the serene and wise look of a man who had lived a long and honored life, and had profited by it in wisdom and inner peace.

Jeff knew that the old man was waiting for him to speak, and so he told him and Mona of the incident in the saloon. "There was nothing else I could do," he finished. "When I called

Dupere's hand, he went for his gun and I had to kill him or get killed."

"Why are you trying to justify yourself?" the old man asked calmly.

"Because I had the feeling that the people around the fire up there had heard the story some other way; they seemed to be showing disapproval of me without hearing my side of it."

"No, it is not altogether that," the old man said gravely. "It is something else. That only complicated matters."

"What is it?"

"There was a man riding through on horseback who stopped off at the camp after you'd gone to Pugh's. Called himself Colston. He had supper with one of the families, and your name came up. He had some things to say."

"Like what?"

"He says that you were kicked out of the marshal's office for murder."

The glow of Dallas' cigarette rose and died and after a long moment he said, "Asa, I know that you are not telling that to accuse me, but to give me a chance to answer the charge."

"We are peace-loving people," said old Asa Hartshorne, puffing his pipe in the darkness beside his wagon, "and we feel that if we mind our own business we will be let alone. Some of the settlers feel that you have deliberately risked trouble because you are so accustomed to making use of your gun on the spur of the moment."

DALLAS SMILED tightly, a little bitterly. "You are asking whether I killed men for the satisfaction of it, you might call it. I will answer that question, Asa, because it has troubled me, just as it is troubling those other people now.

"I came from a wild country down in Texas, where a man's gun was his only protection. And because I could protect myself well with it, I got a deputy's commission here in the Territory. They hired me, Asa, because a man who could not protect himself, who could not get in the first shot, could not have done the things that needed to be done. The odds were against a lawman who could not and did not shoot faster than the men who were running wild around here. I was hired to subdue those men, and they would not be subdued. I had no choice but to kill or to be killed.

"I was fast, yes, I did not wait for that kind of trash to get in the first shot. When I knew they would shoot, I shot first."

"And so they took your badge."

"Yes, they took my badge. There were many big ranchers who had got their start with the long rope and the gun, and there are still many who add to their holdings one way or another by the use of their guns or hired hands. There were a couple of brothers named Chandler who had big holdings up in the Osage, and they were growing by pushing smaller people off their little homesteads. I was sent out to protect the little men, and I did. One of the Chandler brothers and his men were burning out a settler, Asa, and I caught them at it. Just as though somebody came along and was burning your roof from over your head. We fought, and I killed Ben Chandler. The Chandlers were rich men, and were politically important. And so Ben Chandler's brother Tom got my job. That is the whole story. I went back to Texas, and hired to guide you people up here. I am through with the law, and want to settle here with you."

After a silence Asa Hartshorne said, "The Chandlers had a name for being big and respectable men. I've heard of them."

"Yes. They were big, but in my books they were not respectable. They were still thieves. I killed Ben Chandler in the act of thievery. Whatever was said, I know what happened, and I

know I'm not a murderer. That is all that matters to me."

"A man has to answer only to his own conscience. I believe that if you explained things to our friends, that they would understand your point of view."

"I am sorry, but I cannot do that, Asa. They have made up their minds about me on the word of a passing stranger. If they had asked me before making up their minds, I would have felt that I owed them an explanation. Since they have acted otherwise, I cannot go and beg them to hear my story. I'm sorry, but that is the way I am."

The old man was thoughtful a long moment, then he observed, "Pride is the thing that holds a man up, but too much of it is bad for him."

"I'm sorry; I just don't like to be condemned without a hearing."

"That is your own affair, of course," the old man conceded.

Dallas turned to the girl who had been silent. "Would you care to take a walk along the creek trail, Mona? It's pretty."

"I don't believe I would, tonight," the girl answered. "It has been a long day, and it is late. Some other time, if you don't mind."

Dallas said goodnight and went to his own wagon, disturbed at the atmosphere that had come over the camp, and particularly at Mona Hartshorne's refusal to walk with him. In the two weeks that it had taken the wagons to make the trip from the Texas settlement, he had grown strongly attached to this girl who was so pretty and so young, and yet had such a reserve and quiet dignity that she seemed to be much older in wisdom than her years would warrant. He attributed this to the guidance of a man who had such strength of character as her father.

He looked at his horses grazing up on the flats, spoke a word with the men who was guarding all the stock, the horses and mules, oxen and beef cattle, and then came back to his wagon and turned in.

He had stood on his own two feet all his life, caring little for the opinions of others, measuring his own acts by the rule of his own conscience. But that Mona Hartshorne should join with the others in condemning him left him troubled and disappointed.

He had already begun making plans for his future which included her in the picture, which, in truth, were beginning to revolve completely around her.

3

THINGS gradually returned to normal in Jode Pugh's place after the shooting. Pugh called Benny Wister back into a small room in the rear of the building. "Looky here now, Benny. I want you to get word to the boys in a hurry not to lay a hand on this here pilgrim bunch. They're dynamite."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you ever use your ears for anything except to keep your hat from falling down over your eyes? I'll tell you something that might come as a surprise to you. The ears connect up with the brain—in case there is a brain to connect up with—which is doubtful in your case. Stuff pours into your ears like water into a funnel, and it is supposed to go into the brain like whiskey goes into a jug. When it gets into the brain, it is supposed to age there and come out in the form of common sense."

"What won't they think up next?" Wister exclaimed. "But what does it mean?"

"Did you ever hear of the Doolin gang? Bill Doolin was about as smart a man as ever rode the long trail. Wasn't he?"

"He must be. He's still riding free, and his pockets are bulging with wampum."

"Well, you heard about the battle at Ingalls, didn't you?"

"Sure. A bunch of deputy marshals acting like a hunting party worked their way up to Ingalls and hung around until Doolin and his boys come into Ingalls to let off a little steam. Then the deputies lit into them, Several people killed, I remember. Doolin got wounded, but him and Bitter Creek and Cimarron Rose got away. I remember—"

"Never mind telling me the historical details; I know them by heart, and you've stumbled right over the main part, and gone blindly on."

"What do you mean?"

"A bunch of deputies got right down on top of the gang by posing as a hunting party. All right. Jeff Dallas is a deputy marshal, ain't he? Did it ever occur to you that they're pulling the same gag on us? I bet half them men is deputy marshals, just going to hang around till a real big bunch of the boys come in that they want right bad, and then they'll surround this place and the fireworks will start like it did at Ingalls. That is what Dallas is doing here. And that's why you're going to tell the boys to keep their ears tucked in until Mister Dallas and his party have departed hence."

"You mean they'd bring women and household goods and livestock and all, just for a blind?"

"Why not? Uncle Whiskers in Washington is footing the bill, ain't he? And do you know of anything a bunch of men with their snouts in the government trough loves better than spending the money of honest taxpayers like you and me? Now when you ride out tonight, you pass the word for the boys not be popping in here more'n two or three at a time. Better tell Texas Red and Buck Linebarger not to show up at all. These people might be after them on account of that little joke they played on the express messenger of the Choctaw and Red River Railway. Them people can't take a joke at all."

●

HALF AN hour later back at the bar, Wister was finishing up a talk with a stranger who had dropped in. With the natural curiosity of men who are suspicious of strangers, Wister had been questioning the man, and the things he had learned brought a considerable amount of excitement to him, though it was hid behind the veils of his malevolent slatey eyes.

"Come on," he said, "I want you to meet a man."

Wister caught the eyes of Pugh who was talking to a group of four mountain men at a corner table, then he escorted the stranger back along the passageway to the rear.

When Pugh joined them, Wister said, "Jode, I want to make you acquainted with Chug Colston. He's been vacationing with old Buck Toomey."

Pugh's appraising glance swept the man as he nodded. "Friend of Buck's, huh? When's Buck getting out?"

"He ain't been getting along too well with the warden. Looks like he's going to have to do his full time."

"The best way out of a Federal prison is through the front door," Pugh observed sagely. "And the quickest way is not to sass the man with the whip in his hand. What's on your mind?"

Colston, a loose-jointed, shuffling man, grinned and rubbed his fingers with his thumb. "I need a chance to pick up a piece of money."

"And what would you do to get it?"

"Buck was telling me that I was just the kind of man that you could find a place for. I never liked the smell of a marshal even when the wind was blowing the other way."

Pugh chuckled. "Then you come to a hell of a place. We're just being honored by a well-known peace officer and a bunch of his duly-appointed friends."

Colston laughed. "You speaking of Jeff Dallas?"

"That is the gentleman. Is that a

laughing matter where you came from?"

"So to speak, yes. You see, I got in a little work with the Chandler boys up in the Osage. Dallas tangled with them and killed one of them. That was an error. The Chandlers carry a lot of weight in the right places, and so Jeff Dallas is a man *who used to be* a deputy marshal. He tarnished his badge, and he is lucky that he did not stretch his own neck."

Pugh's face took on the color of a radish as the anger swelled up in him. "You mean he ain't a marshal no more?"

"A sad thing when a man misused his authority," Colston said, shaking his head gravely, "but Dallas has been carrying a stigma instead of a badge, lo, these last three months."

Pugh's balled fist pounded the wall. "That dirty, lowdown, stinking double-crosser," he roared. "He walks in here and steals eighteen hundred dollars from me. I'll nail that skunk's hide to the barn door as sure as I'm alive; no man living is stealing my money."

One of Wister's mirthless grins cracked his lips slightly. "I thought you just made good the money Dupere rooked him out of."

"What's the difference?" Pugh bellowed. "Do you think I'd have gave it to him if you hadn't told me he was a marshal? What do you think I am, crazy? That was to buy him off."

"Well," Wister said, "it ain't my fault. He *was* a marshal when he murdered my brother. The kid was just driving a little bunch of calves along the road one night, minding his own business, when Dallas ups and shoots back at him. Killed the kid dead. Fine a boy as ever drawed the breath of life. He could steal your sox while you was asleep without even taking your shoes off to do it. Smart ain't the word for it."

"Never mind your brother, and why wasn't it your fault? You was the one that said he was a marshal, so you cost me eighteen hundred dollars. And you're going to get it back."

PUGH WAS thoughtful a moment, then added, "You and the rest of the boys. And we might just as well clean out the whole camp now as later."

"I thought you was telling Dallas how you liked settlers here."

"I was, and I do. That is a well heeled outfit; you can tell it by their gear. Best of everything, good horses and mules and stock, good wagons. Those men are substantial, and naturally they ain't setting out to build new farms without enough cash to see them do their building and improving, and to carry them along a year or so until they can cash in a crop. I'd calculate them wagons to average maybe two or three thousand dollars in cash per family. I'd hate to say how much money was hid in coffeepots and mattresses in them wagons down there at the creek. It's a temptation to the most honest."

"I never thought about it that way," Wister said, awed by the thought.

"Of course you didn't," Pugh answered.

"So what are we waiting for?" Pugh asked, and for once an eagerness showed in his face. "I can round up some of the boys before daylight."

"You can not. Them people's wagons are all in a bunch right now, and being here, they will be cautious. They got guards over their stock now. They'll be hair trigger till we show

'em we don't mean 'em no harm. Let 'em get used to the place. They'll move out tomorrow or next day and pick out their land. They'll be scattered, only one family to the quarter section, and they'll be busy digging in. We'll wait. Then those men will be by theirselves with the nearest help a quarter of a mile away. And they'll be tired from cutting logs for their houses all day, so they'll let their guard down." He clucked. "Like stealing candy from a baby. Pick it up and go to the next neighbor."

Wister shook his head in admiration. "It's a pity, ain't it?"

"It will be," Pugh said. "Go tell the bartender that Colston can have credit at the bar. I've got a job for him now."

Pugh turned to Colston. "Say you had supper with the pilgrims? They don't know who you are?"

"That's right."

"Then here's what you're going to do. You're supposed to be a square man looking over the country for a place to settle. You go pick yourself up some work here and there helping the settlers."

"What's that for?"

Pugh flipped a twenty-dollar gold-piece in his hand thoughtfully. "This Jeff Dallas. Dupere was a fast man with a gun, but Dallas was faster. And he's the only one of those pilgims who wears a hand gun on him all the time. I'd hate to see any of my fine young friends shot down in the prime of life by a coward's gun. I'd give five hundred dollars to know that my boys weren't in danger."

He flipped the coin to Colston, then, rubbing his thumb across his fingers significantly, he said, "Five hundred dollars in gold weighs right heavy. But it would be worth it to me, every cent of it."

"If I was you," Colston assured him, "I wouldn't give it another thought. Not one more thought."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Pugh answered. "It relieves my mind."

4

THE MORNING of the day after their arrival, the pilgrims sought out their land. All hands turned to and staked out their quarter-sections, rolling out the boundaries with a marked buggy wheel, counting the revolutions to measure the distance. By mid-afternoon the train had broken up, each family driving its wagons and its livestock to its plot, and setting about the task of unloading, throwing up small corrals for their workstock and milk cows.

The next morning, practically all the men had the beds off their wagons and were up on the hillside cutting straight pine logs, skidding them down to the wagons with their oxen and mules, and loading them out, taking them to their homesites for the erection of their cabins.

Men were trading work on this heavy job, and Jeff Dallas was working with Asa Hartshorne. Asa was old, and though he was strong, he did not have the strength of youth, and Dallas was holding up the heavy end of the job. Even Mona Hartshorne was lending a hand.

Many of the settlers were working in this same stand of pine, and the ring of axes and the sounds of men hauling the logs downhill with their skid mules came busily from the bank of the small creek where they had been working since daylight.

Jeff Dallas was felling trees with his axe, topping them and trimming off the limbs. Mona, dressed in overalls, was driving the skid mule. Dallas would wrap the chain around the fallen and trimmed log and Mona would drive the mule, dragging the log to the skid at the skidway at the foot of the hill where the logs were loaded onto the wagon by old Asa, and hauled to the building site.

At noon the sound of axes died out in the pines as the men knocked off to eat. Mona was to leave the mule down at the foot of the hill to eat and rest while she would bring a basket of lunch up to the creek where Jeff was working.

He had been looking forward to this little picnic lunch alone with Mona all morning, and he felt his hopes rising that he could come to some understanding with her. He had felt that he had reason for having built up his hopes that she shared some of the feeling he had for her. But since the shooting on the night of their arrival he was not so sure.

Somehow she had changed. While she was courteous and friendly as she always was, there seemed to have occurred an emotional withdrawal; she was more distant, less frankly at ease with him.

Somehow he laid this change at the door of her brother-in-law, David Mosely. Mona's older sister's husband was a good and energetic man, but he was self-righteous. A good farmer, he had been a kind of religious leader back in the settlement where there had been no regular preacher, and expecting to be called on to preach here, he had assumed for himself the moral leadership of the little group, paralleling the civic leadership which the group itself had bestowed upon his father-in-law. Thinking of the man now as he continued trimming a fallen tree while waiting for Mona to return with a lunch, Dallas had to admit that the man was morally sound and energetic, but that he had the flaw of self-righteousness.

It was Mosely who had seemed to have set the stamp of disapproval on Dallas after the killing, and it was this influence which Dallas now felt affected Mona.

He was thinking of these things while he cut the last limb off the fallen log, when it happened.

HE HEARD a short loud scream behind his back, and instinctively whirled around. The picture burned itself indelibly on his mind like a night scene suddenly illuminated by a blinding flash of lightning.

A man stood in a clump of buckbrush with a pistol in his hand. When Dallas saw him the man was moving the point of the gun from him toward Mona Hartshorne who stood with her basket in her hand and a look of terrified consternation on her face as the man swung from Dallas' back toward her in his surprise.

Dallas dropped his axe, and shot the man dead!

As the echo of two explosions rolled like thunder along the mountainside, Dallas was already running toward Mona, who stood petrified.

He saw the man stretched out on his back behind the brush. He took Mona in his arms, lifted the basket out of her hand and tried to comfort her. "That's all," he said; "the man won't bother you."

"It was you," she stammered. "He was going to shoot you in the back. When I screamed, he turned around suddenly. Who is he?"

Dallas walked over and looked at the man. "I don't know," he answered. "I never saw him before."

There were sounds of men shouting, and of their footsteps as they raced through the timber, and now a couple of the settlers broke into the small clearing and came up to where Dallas and Mona were standing.

David Mosely was one of those who joined them on the hillside. He was a lean man with a long, severe face which tightened up around the lips as he stood over the dead man and examined him.

He looked up, accusation in his eyes, his usual restrained attitude of disapproval showing through. "What did you kill him for?"

The question, the assumption of a right to form moral judgments, which was the stamp of all Mosely's actions, now irritated Dallas. "I didn't like what he was doing," he answered shortly.

"What did you have against him? Is he an old enemy of yours?"

"I never saw the man before in my life." Angry now, Dallas was unable to bring himself to explain his actions to this man who was assuming to sit in judgment on him.

"I have. He was working for me; I feel responsible for his safety."

"You don't need to feel that responsibility any longer."

"But I do. You don't know him, but you still refuse to say why you shot him. You will forgive me if I say on behalf of all of us that you are very free with your gun."

Mona had now got hold of herself, and there was in her voice an impatience with her brother-in-law. "He started to shoot Jeff in the back, David. I saw it and screamed in time for Jeff to protect himself."

"I see," Mosely answered, and Dallas got the idea that Mosely was disappointed to hear Mona justifying the shooting. "Are you sure that Dallas had no other recourse except to shoot?"

"Why, of course! What could he do when a man was aiming a gun at his back?"

Mosely was silent while he turned the dead man over and examined him. His gaze stopped long when he saw the red splotch on the man's faded blue shirt. Dallas' bullet had entered the man's body behind the right shoulder blade. Mosely's eyes focused on this as though he were using his gaze as a pointer to demonstrate to those who had gathered around that the man had been shot from behind. He pursed his lips tightly and looked from the face of one man to another, as he slowly stood up.

"I don't presume to know about such things," he said righteously, "But to me it looks impossible to shoot a man under the shoulder blade if he is facing you."

By now Jeff Dallas was so thoroughly angry that he did not trust himself to speak, even if he had been willing to offer Mosely an explanation. Mosely looked him in the face waiting for an answer, and Dallas turned away from him in disgust.

MONA MUST have read what was going on in Jeff's mind, and undertook to save the situation. "I told you what happened," she said to Mosely. "When I screamed the man turned toward me. Naturally Jeff was getting his gun out, and even if it hadn't been too late to stop, he still saw that the man was swinging the gun in my direction. I don't suppose the man intended to shoot me, but just turned my way when I screamed. What else could Jeff do? Wait to see whether the man was going to pull his trigger?"

"But the man wasn't wearing a gun. He came to me asking for work this morning, and I was careful to note that he was not armed. I wouldn't have hired that kind of man; there are too many like that around here now."

"He had a gun," Mona said sharply. "And he died in his tracks, so the gun must be still around here."

One of the men kicked through the buckbrush and found the gun, a small pocket weapon, where it had fallen out of sight. He picked it up, broke out the cylinder and dumped the shells, including one empty one, into his hand. He sniffed the gunbarrel, then threw the whole business down beside the dead man.

"He shot, all right," the man observed.

"Maybe he did," Mosely conceded. "Still, Dallas was the one that did the killing. The second one since we've been here. It appears that the mortality rate goes up wherever he is. It will be uncomfortable with such a gunman in our midst—"

Jeff Dallas hit him, and hit him hard. Mosely got up off the ground slowly and wiped the blood of his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, showing no fight at all.

"After this," Dallas said tightly, "You had better learn the distinction between a man who wears a gun, and a gunman. Come on, Mona, we'd better eat before Asa gets back."

5

JEFF DALLAS labored all the afternoon in the woods, expressing some of his built-up tension in the savagery with which he attacked the trees he was cutting. The crowd had separated, but he knew that Mosely was spreading the poison of his self-righteousness among the other men.

It was almost sunset when he shouldered his axe and went downhill with Mona, where Asa was waiting for them with the day's last load of logs. They rode along with him toward the settlement.

Asa was quiet a long time, giving his attention to the team. Then finally he said, "Mona and I would like you to have supper with us tonight."

"No, thanks," Dallas answered. "I've got a lot of things to do."

"I know," Asa answered, "but I wanted to talk with you. I'm very much worried."

"You don't have to worry about me," Dallas assured him. "I can take care of myself."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I'm wondering who that man was that tried to kill you; and I'm wondering what it means to the rest of us. You can take care of yourself, but what about everybody else; the women and children? Their belongings?"

Relieved, Dallas answered. "I was thinking the same thing, and I have a feeling that I know what it's all about. But I don't think it would interest the rest of the people."

"You're thinking of David," the old man said. "He is an honest man, but he just happens to represent about the worst kind of goodness we have to put up with. I can't expect you to forgive him, but I had hopes that you could forget him and not hold what he does against the rest of the people. I have a feeling now that they need you more than ever, more than they need a man with the peaceful inclinations of such a sterling man as my son-in-law."

Dallas caught a touch of irony in the old man's voice, and liked him better for it. At least old Asa sensed that there was something dark and ominous hanging over the camp.

"All right, Asa, I'll tell you what's on my mind. I can't prove it, of course, but all the training I have had makes me sense it. Look here at the facts; let us reason like Pugh might possibly reason. His joint is just a rat hole, and rats don't want honest people sitting on their doorsteps. They want to be rid of them. But these rats live off of honest people sitting on their doorsteps. They want to be rid of them. But these rats live off of honest people. They know that a bunch of substantial people are not coming here with all this valuable equipment and start homesteading without having the cash to see them through for a year or so. In short, they know that there is a lot—an awful lot—of cold cash as well as goods right here for the taking. They know that I'm the only one of this bunch that might be a danger to them. The rest of the men don't wear guns, and they are not used to them. Tell me, Asa, suppose I were dead and the rest of the settlers scattered out a quarter of a mile apart, each family having a considerable amount of money hidden in his effects. What would you say Pugh's men would do, knowing that they don't want you around, that you have got a lot of money, and that you were a bunch of scattered men and women who couldn't defend yourselves? What would you do and when would you do it?"

"I see what you mean," Asa said

gravely, "And I hadn't thought of it quite as seriously as that before. They would get rid of the only man who had had any experience fighting, and then they would rob and kill the rest of them at leisure and practically in complete safety."

"That's what I was thinking," Dallas answered. "But of course, Mosely may have other ideas."

"Damn Mosely!" old Asa said of his son-in-law.

After he had driven a little distance farther, Asa spoke again. "What are we going to do to prevent it?"

"You should do what you think best," Dallas said. "For my own part, I am not going to do anything."

That quieted the old man, and he spoke no more while they reached camp and the girl got the supper.

•

AFTER SUPPER around the campfire, the old man lighted his pipe and then asked, "Dallas, why don't you want to help these people?"

"Because I know they will not take my advice. They believe in Mosely, and so they will follow him."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am not going to do anything. I have decided that I don't want to settle here. So, I was going to offer to give you all my stuff except one of my horses."

The girl looked her surprise. The old man was silent for a long while, then asked, "Would you want to say why? There must be more to it than that."

"There is, but I wouldn't care to go into it any farther."

The girl suddenly got to her feet. "Jeff will you take a walk with me? I'd like to talk to you. Dad will excuse us for a moment."

They walked out across the darkness, into a small grove of oaks, and the girl stopped and turned to him, near him in the deep black of the woods. "Why, Jeff? I know you are not afraid of guns. Nor of David. What are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid of anything," he told her. "But this is not what I want."

"It is what you told me you had always wanted. If this isn't it, then what do you want?"

"Something that will not be here. Like I told you, peace and security and a home."

"You could build that here."

"No. These people do not like the things I believe in; they are not my friends. I have told you what I wanted, and that includes neighbors who are friends. I am not afraid of them, nor of the influence of Mosely. It will look as though I were afraid of him, but I've got the courage to walk away despite that. I will not stay where I don't want to stay just to prove that I'm not afraid to stay."

The girl laid a hand on his arm, and there was no reserve in her as she spoke. "And you are going away—without saying the things you wanted to say to me? Why, Jeff?"

"Because Mosely is a part of your family. If you trusted yourself to me, I would only bring unhappiness and discord to you and your father. I would rather lose you, Mona, than to make you unhappy. And if you knew how much I need you, you would know how hard it is for me to say this."

She went into his arms, and there was no need for words as she gave him her lips.

A while afterward she said, "Jeff, what are we going to do? What can we do?"

"I will give your father some suggestions that he can make to those people if he thinks they will act on them. Then I am pulling out."

"Jeff," she said, and there was both sadness and firmness in her voice. "I will be ready to go with you."

"You? Why you can't leave your father. He is all alone."

"It will hurt, but my place is with you. If you must go away, then I must go with you."

"No. You can't do that. I won't let

you sacrifice your whole life with your family."

"You can't stop me. I have never been in love before, Jeff, and I didn't know that it could hurt so much. But I do know what I have to do."

Jeff Dallas bowed his head so that his face was resting in her hair, and he was silent a long moment. Then he held her away from him, and there was a different tone in his voice.

"All right," he said. "You are not going to start your life with me by making a sacrifice. If you can give up everything for me, I suppose I can give up some of my personal pride. I might be better off, at that. Come on, we'll do what we can for Mosely's damned sheep, anyway."

●

REACHING the wagon, Jeff Dallas spoke to the old man who had been dozing in his rocking chair set on the ground before the campfire.

"Asa, Mona and I are going to be married. I hope we have your permission."

"Mona is a woman of her own," the old man said. "And is capable of making her own choice. I will say that I am not surprised, and that I am not disappointed. But I hope you don't object to me expressing the wish that you were able to start your life in more harmony with your neighbors."

"I'm glad you mentioned that. We can talk about the marriage later; right now, I think we'd better try to do something for the settlers. I've had some experience in this sort of thing, and if you don't mind, I'd like to make some suggestions."

"You're the best man for the job."

"Then here's what I propose. The people won't like this, but because they're not likely to be willing to follow my advice, I'd like you to have men go to all of the settlers and tell them to get their wagons back to this high place on your open land. Tell them to leave all their household belongings and stock where they've unloaded it. Tell each party to hide its money somewhere *away from* his belongings, and to come here as quickly as possible, bringing his firearms and ammunition."

"They will ask why."

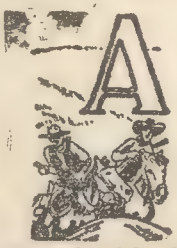
"Tell them about the attempt on my life. When Pugh is sure that the man he sent to kill me is dead, he is going to hit this settlement while the people are scattered and unorganized. Now, when he finds us barricaded in a circle of our own wagons, he will be furious, and he will know that the quicker he attacks, the better. I am convinced that he will hit us tonight. If not tonight, then as soon as he can get enough men together. But we will be forted up behind a circle of our own wagons, and we can hold them off."

"Like Indians," the old man mused.

"Exactly, and those men are every bit as murderous as Indians."

"I will do it," Asa said. "Some of the folks might not agree, but we will do all we can."

6



ASA HARTSHORNE had gone about his arrangements in his quiet and methodical way. He rode to the nearest settlement, Mosely's, and told him the story, saying that he was in accord with the way Dallas was handling things.

Mosely was not in accord, as Asa suspected would be the case.

Standing before his own campfire, clad in his underwear and his self-righteousness, Mosely had listened to Asa, and then spoken his piece. "I think this Jeff Dallas is nothing better than a gunman himself. A man who was kicked out of a law enforcement agency is not a man to be trusted. You know, Asa, that many lawman are hardly a step above outlaws themselves, and I consider Dallas such a type."

"We are not concerned with personalities now," Asa said calmly. "We are only concerned with the safety of our neighbors. You had better get your stuff together and come on to the rise."

"I will not budge a foot. I have set my goods on this land, and on this spot I stay. I will not run and I will not fight, and I defy the outlaws or Dallas to make me do either."

"Very well," Asa said sadly. "Will you send Emma to us for safety?"

Emma Mosely, Mona's sister, had come out of the wagon with a wrapper over her gown. "No, Dad. I will have to stay with David."

"Yes," the old man answered. "I guess you will."

He turned his horse and rode on to the next neighbor, torn inside more by the obstinate self-righteousness of his son-in-law than he would have been by a man who was deliberately bad. It was such people as him, Asa knew, who in the name of their adamantine convictions often made more trouble than wilful troublemakers.

By midnight a few of the settlers and their wives drove up to the hill in their wagons. Old Asa formed the wagons into a circle like the barricades older settlers had used against the Indians. They hobbled the horses out to graze and set a guard over the camp. But nobody slept; the women got together in their little groups and were for the most part tight-lipped and silent, while the men sat around another big fire and discussed this and that, speaking of almost everything except the thing that was on their minds.

When morning came and they had not been attacked, there was relief in the camp, but with it crept in the doubt that Asa's judgment was sound. They did not distrust him, but the talk was that Asa was being too much influenced by Jeff Dallas. They remembered the things that Mosely had said.

Some of the men went back to work on their houses, others moved here and

there restlessly. A few went down and talked to Mosely, who stayed at his claim and worked at putting up corrals. The camp was divided and restless, uncertain as to which way to turn, not knowing what to believe.

During the day a few more settlers drifted in and rolled their wagons up into the circle. And a few more, after having talked again to Mosely, took their wagons and went home.

The day went on, tense and anxious, building up more uncertainty and short humor in the men. They avoided Jeff Dallas, who went about his own business and in turn spoke only to Asa and Mona. He knew he could not persuade these men to stay idle in their barricades another day.

It was after the sky had started fading from black to gray on the following morning that Jeff Dallas, whose restlessness had been growing constantly under the tension, awoke to find himself listening sharply to a sound which he had either dreamed or which had penetrated into his sleeping mind from the outside.

He sat up in his wagon and listened again, but heard nothing. Alert, he slipped into his boots, took his gun, and crawled out of his wagon and looked around.

The man who was supposed to be on guard was asleep, sitting on a keg before the dead fire, his rifle cradled in his arms.

SEARCHING the terrain around him, Dallas saw something. A column of smoke lighted on its underside by the red glow of flame stood in the distance. Some settler's things were burning; it must have been rifle fire that he heard.

Dallas had his pistol emptied as fast as he could pull the trigger, and the bouncing echo of it brought men tumbling out of their wagons in all stages

of undress, their rifles in their hands, hair unkempt and sleep fading from their eyes.

Jeff Dallas showed them the fire, told them what he thought it meant. And met his first sign of resistance.

"We'd better ride over and see who's having the trouble, and see if we can help," one of the men offered. Others agreed.

"You had better stay here and defend yourselves," Dallas snapped. "Those people had their chance. You can't afford to risk your own families now. Those mountain men want us divided so they can finish us off a few at a time. Asa, keep these men here and in line."

Mona had appeared out of her wagon, and now she said, "You won't have to. Don't you hear—look!"

Her voice was raised suddenly, and she was pointing toward the timber-lined creek, the direction opposite the fire.

A group of horsemen were emerging from the woods, their rifles raised, mounts in a gallop as they descended upon the camp from less than a quarter of a mile distance.

Dallas shouted. "All right, you men get behind those bags of dirt. Women, take your children and get behind those filled water barrels. And remember now, those men want your money and your goods, and they want to drive you out of Hush Creek. It's up to you what you do about it."

Then Dallas joined Asa on the ground behind four stacked feed sacks filled with dirt. He and Asa had had difficulty making the settlers prepare these barricades for themselves, but the first volley of shots from the troop of horsemen which now swooped down on them proved his point to the settlers. Those sacks jolted with the impact of a sudden rain of rifle fire, but no bullet could penetrate one of them.

The women did not obey him; there was not a woman among the children in the little circle-within-a-circle barricade of filled water barrels. The women were out behind the feed sacks with their men, laps full of cartridges, busily reloading weapons.

The circle of wagons was a sudden inferno of gunfire and heavy smoke which settled down in the gray dawn and bit into the nostrils. In the distance the grazing horses neighed excitedly and went over the rise. The stream of attackers circling the wagons met a hail of lead. Horses went down and screeched out their death agony. Men died under the hooves of their own wounded and threshing mounts. The shadowy outlaws circled, fired, dropped afoot and fought from behind dead horses, let their wounded lay out in the open, died on their own running horses, shouted and cursed and added to the din which rose in a solid wave of mad confusion on the bank of Hush Creek.

The men in this circle were no longer the disciples of David Mosely's proud refusal to fight; they shouted their defiance, and outlaws died under the withering blast of their roaring guns. Their women knelt beside them and fed them the ammunition which they burned in defense of their homes. And no man among them was one to turn his back and run.

The children cried in their small stockade, and survived their first taste of a life which would be fraught with peril and with rich rewards. And the smoke and the rattle of musketry was everywhere over the land.

The settlers poured round after round of lead into the wild bunch from the hills, and the inevitable swath which death cut through the outlaw ranks withered their courage. Pugh had told them that the settlers would be scattered, frightened, and unorganized, and they had found instead, a group of determined men who knealt behind impregnable barricades of dirt and mowed them down with ruthless gunfire. Their will to fight drained from them, and singly, in twos and threes, and then almost as a whole group, those living and able rode off toward the woods. The attackers were routed. The fight was finished.

DALLAS HAD seen Jode Pugh on a rise back of the fight, shouting and urging the men on. And now as the battle was dying with the suddenness with which it started, he looked again for Pugh and saw that he was gone.

Dallas left the protection of the dirt bags and went out under the wheels of Hartshorne's wagon, dashing afoot toward a saddled horse which stood with reins dragging over the body of a dead outlaw.

He caught up the horse and whipped the animal toward Pugh's deadfall. He got there in time to find Pugh with a heavy-weighted flour sack over his shoulder, heading back for his horse. "Never mind, Pugh," he said. "You're not going anywhere. We'll be having a sort of court of justice down at the wagons, and you will be its first customer; let the money bag slide, and raise your hands."

Pugh let the bag slide—and went for his gun. By the time the white sack hit the ground, Pugh and Dallas were both firing. Both men connected. Pugh went down and Dallas went down. Dallas rolled over in time to see that Pugh was up on hands and knees, and raising his sights.

Dallas blew Pugh's brains out.

And then Dallas passed out. It was almost noon before he recovered his senses and found himself lying on a pallet in the shade of Hartshorne's wagon. Mona was holding his hand, and so the wound in his side was not hurting him at all, that is, nothing to speak of, considering the effect of having his head in Mona's lap, and an anxious group of friendly faces surrounding them.

He looked at her. "Mosely?" he asked.

She shook her head sadly. "He wouldn't fight and wouldn't run. What they did to him was terrible, Dad says. Emma will come and live with Dad when you get well. There will be three other funerals, but the people know now that they will have to fight to live here, and they want you to organize them into a defensive force. You will, won't you Jeff?"

He took her hand. "With your help, I'll give them all I've got. We are on Hush Creek to stay."

●

Steve Farrell and his partner, Curly John Myers, had no quarrel with the Mormons, and wanted none. Until they found that Slade, the man who'd run off with Farrell's sister, was here in Deseret and was now a Bishop of the Mormon Tabernacle. Which meant that striking at Slade would probably involve tangling with his parishoners...

This powerful feature novel of the vengeance trail by Ben Smith

SATAN RIDES THE • WASATCH

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DOUBLE • ACTION WESTERN

HELL'S WAGON BOSS

FEATURE NOVEL

By W. Edmunds Claussen

"Apaches are bad, Richards, but you better keep your eyes open for one other thing: Anse Pletcher and that female partner of his. Aside them two, a diamond-back rattler ain't got no fangs a'tall!"

EHRENBERG WAS its roughest, these scarlet days following the Civil War. Men yelled constantly at braying mules in the straggling lines of sun-baked freight wagons jostling for position along the rutted lanes they called streets. It had been fate that Henry Wickenburg should open his bonanza of gold in the Vulture mines. The Treasury sorely needed gold this year at war's end; and victorious Yank and embittered Confederate came in alike to slug their wills against this savage country. The grim desert crossing between the Colorado River and the gold district had become the bloodiest road in the West —Trail of the Graves, it was called.

Al Richards came from the raw-timbered Ehrenberg warehouse feeling all this surge about him in the breathless, still heat of late afternoon. He had turned in his gold and the receipt for his merchandise was deep in a money belt under his shirt. Relief rippled through Al and his breathing came easier. Thus far he had fulfilled his obligations to Creel to the letter. But the warehouse would not be able to give him delivery of the goods until this time tomorrow; the press of waiting wagons before the loading docks was this great.

His gaze fell on one man astraddle a powder cask before a string of freight wagons. The printing on the

"Madeline has handled the wagons herself, many a time!"

brown ducking sides brought Al up short. *Consolidated Freight,* it read. His thoughts harked back to Jim Creel's warning, delivered so solemnly:

"Apaches are bad but you better keep your eyes open for one other thing. Anse Pletcher—A. S. J. Pletcher and that female partner of his. They call her the freightin' queen of La Paz. Aside them two, a diamondback ain't got no fangs a'tall!"

He was thinking of this now as the big man turned. He had tangled yellow hair that fell against each shoulder and a greasy leather jacket an Indian wouldn't have worn. Evil took complete dominance of the rawhide mask that made up his face and his eyes were the wellhead of this evil. His gaze bored at Al as he walked yonder where he had left his wagon in a half hearted shade of an adobe saloon.

Beside this freighter a seven-foot mulatto was tarring the wagon axle, the ugliest man Al had ever seen. He wore brass bracelets welded to his arms and an oily sweat rivered over his shirtless back while he hoisted the wheel and fitted it over the axle.

The other man pulled erect as Al walked closer. Warning hit Al before the big man spoke. "The name's Pletcher," the wagonmaster said. "All these wagons are mine—twenty-two of them; the biggest, fattest string to pull out of Ehrenberg this summer."

Richards had one wagon that had

brought him from Carolina as far as the Vulture strike. It was here Jim Creel had made him a proposition, and Al thought of that proposition now. As fair as ever a man made to another, and if he got himself in trouble it wouldn't be through lack of warning.

Creel had a mine behind the Vulture hills and needed supplies. He'd walked around the broken down Conestoga three times, squinting and feeling the horses. Presently he gave Al the same careful grading and found a man that was young, sober, and with definite family background. He didn't like Easterners—but the war had broken some pretty solid families.

Creel said, "I got a shaft that needs machinery and black powder. If I freight through Pletcher he'll find out what kind of rock I've hit and one of his gunsharps will put me out of the way. Tell you what, fella; hang around my place till we put your wagon in shape. By that time your horses'll be stronger. There's a thousand dollars in it for you if you haul in a load. You'll earn it, though."

Al was thinking about Creel's warning now as he looked into Pletcher's face. He wondered if the scalding light behind these eyes was always so plain. Or was it here now because Pletcher knew he was freighting for Creel?

A RIVER steamboat whistle cut the thick air and Pletcher got to his feet, moved on Al. "You got one wagon?" And when Al nodded he went on. "You won't make it single. Throw in with my company—small outfits always do, in this country."

"Thanks," Al said. "I'll take it alone."

Pletcher gave him a shrewd look. "You see Apache smoke comin' over the desert?"

"I saw signals."

"They don't raid wagons coming toward the river; they wait until there's a couple tons of freight in each box. Must be a hundred men thought the way you do this summer. They're dead now."

Al met his hard glance and thought: *He takes me for a boy. A boy that will scare easily.*

The war had done something to Richards. Riding with Hampton's cavalry had given him an inner disdain of death that covered his gentler breeding. It was here on his face and in that moment Pletcher glimpsed it and his own expression tightened. Al said, "I'll still trust an Apache."

Pletcher jerked as though struck. "You mean I ain't to be trusted?"

Richards had meant to let it rest here, but he saw the rage on Pletcher's face and it drove him on. He said softly, "I wouldn't trust Consolidated Freight; we'll put it like that."

Pletcher jumped him then. A long blacksnake hung on the wagon and Pletcher's fingers clutched it eagerly as he came on Al. There was raw anger in his eyes and the whip was lifted above his head when the woman drove against him. She hit him hard against the chest with a straight arm and he fumbled backward across the powder cask and went down between the wheels.

She turned to Al, then, and he dropped his balled fist that was ready to knock Pletcher into kingdom come. Surprise swept across his face. *An aristocrat,* she thought. A proud man of the South who had been raised on silver service and soft foods. She didn't know too much about his kind, but when they broke they made bitter, disillusioned men. His gray cavalry pants still clung to his lean waist, tattered in places, and his Service Colt hung on his belt. By that she read him an officer; according to Lee's surrender they had been allowed their sidearms.

Al saw the will that smoldered in her eyes. Her mouth was slashed in a callousness and he knew she had caught at least his last words to Pletcher, and understood them. There was a metallic ring to her voice, "I've heard a good bit about Consolidated being

bad. Mister, what is it we've done to you?"

Her gaze cut him deep and embarassment ran through him. He was forced to admit, "You've done nothing —so far."

"So far?" Her words dripped sarcasm and then she turned on Pletcher who was rising somewhat awkwardly from under the wagon.

AL NOTICED then she was dressed in a brown skirt with a tight wool bodice and wore small jack boots, and about her he sensed a tight compactness of body that left him a little wordless. She was everything opposite to the women he had known in Carolina. He had heard how she took her freight outfits from La Paz and bossed them through the toughest mining and Mojave country of the Southwest. When the freighting trade swung to Ehrenberg it appeared she and Pletcher must fight to the death in a battle for supremacy. Yet she'd surprised the whole country by forming a consolidation with her competitor. The shrewd ones winked an eye and said, "Too wise to fight!"

To Anse Pletcher she said now, "I heard what you said as I walked up. Anse, who owns these wagons? To whom does Consolidated belong?"

Pletcher got lamely to his feet, a big man with the bluster knocked out of his tone but none of the hate softened in his eyes. His mouth twisted in a leer. "Ain't no cause to take on like that, Madame La Paz. I guess *we* own the outfit. The wagons ain't all mine; half's yours."

Some of the stoniness went out of her and an elusive softness worked at her mouth. But she told Pletcher quickly, "You better stop in the office; we need to talk." To Al she said more brittlely, "I guess you can pull out. Men like you make their own trouble."

He'd been taught politeness to women and there didn't seem any respectful answer to Madame La Paz. He walked off without any attempt and then Pletcher's voice reached him, thick with resentment.

"If we run across you in the Vultures I'll give you something to beef about. Jim Creel will have to ride out to salvage his own wagon."

Al walked in silence, knowing patience was going to be the most difficult thing in the world to acquire. In the old days of the South he would have smashed the mouth that uttered such words. His fists knotted at his sides and his cheeks turned ashen as he fought to master his anger.

And still the thought crawled through his brain: *What does Madame La Paz think of her partner now?*

2

HE TURNED his team back into a public wagon camp at the edge of town. It was a bare, cheerless lot where a score of freighters already parked around its edges. In these first moments Madame La Paz was bright across his mind. A new kind of creature; he could feel the piercing strength of her eyes still. Yet woman's charms were about her. She had red lips, a little contracted; a full breast hidden beneath the swell of her bodice. The brown skirt had lain in a shapely way against her hips, her thighs. Was her iron will, he wondered, as great as the suggestion of her passion?

The wagoneer next to him was a gray bearded, dour man who talked while he took his mules out of traces. "There's fair grass in the bottoms about a mile upriver. We're puttin' the animals to graze and takin' turns at guard tonight."

Al said he would join them, knowing his horses would enjoy the luxury of marshy river ground. His fingers climbed to his belt and he debated the advisability of leaving his money belt in his wagon. He decided it was safer where it was, and led his team from the pole, falling in beside the gaunt teamster.

Half way toward the river the rumble of an outgoing wagon column made them glance back. A string of eight freighters was leaving Ehrenberg. Al watched the lifting dust, the swiftly flicking arms of the drivers cracking their whips. He wished he was pulling out loaded with that string.

Creel had been right; Ehrenberg was a hotbed of violence. But there was no fear in Richards; four grim years of the army had taken that away. Yet, he could feel the breath of danger against his back. Pletcher had thirty or forty tough teamsters to make his orders stick. Besides gunsharps. And Al wanted no fight with this outfit; he wanted only to load Creel's merchandise and return to the Vultures.

Beside him the gaunt teamster said, "Ben Callon's company pullin' out. They're freightin' into the Harquahalas where they made a hell-roarin' strike last month." He let a moment ride and then added. "Used to be nobody wanted that kind of country. Now it won't be long until Pletcher takes their contracts, I reckon."

"You think his partner is as bad as he is?"

The long-faced freighter spat. "She's harder than he is, only Pletcher ain't found that out yet. Honest, too. A two-fisted female that's fightin' to hold fast to what her old man left her."

"So that's how she came into the freighting business?"

The teamster's eyes were twinkling points of light. "They tell she was born in a wagon box. Apaches screamin' around a circle and the old man shootin' them off their horses. Old Freedom Robison, her dad, has been dead a year now. She bull-whipped his outfits mighty well until Pletcher came."

They moved onto slightly higher ground and startled a pair of tiny burro deer back into the river thickets. From here they had a full sight of the Colorado. It was a silt-laden stream flowing between low banks, and blood red in sunset. Half a hundred animals moved slowly over the low ground swells. In one corner of the lot a group a group of wagoneers bent over their spread blanket, tattered cards in their hands. Another trimmed a lantern and his coarse laugh ran under the mesquite trees. They were a thinned-down crowd, bronzed from work in this rock and sand country.

Al turned his horses in with the others and watched the turn of cards on the blanket. He was a gambler at heart and temptation rode him. Yet he put it aside, remembering the gold in his belt. Long ago he had learned not to let strangers know what he carried.

●

HE RETURNED alone to the wagon park. Night had come down and port lights glistened on the river. There was a damp feel to the air, thick and noticeable after the desert trail. He keened the scent with his nostrils, detecting smoke; automatically he hastened his gait.

He saw a smoke-reef low against the slate sky. It burst into red fame as he raced toward it. Inward warning laced him and then the shock came to him fully. He reached the yard and saw his wagon afire.

Yardmen had rolled an empty van to the river. It came squealing back into the yard as he raced in. They had a barrel of water lashed to the bed but there could be no salvaging his outfit. Instead freighters threw water over the other wagon ducking. River breeze was carrying sparks over the lot. He pulled short and stared at his wreck. All he had saved of his life before the war was represented in that wagon, and his horses. It was like the closing of a door, and the past was now sealed

behind him. He knew Pletcher had passed the word to break him.

A freighter paused with his empty bucket. "Sorry for you; it went up before we knew there was a fire."

Al nodded, reading the friendliness in the other's face. "Did you see anyone near?"

"No. We were cooking grub at the end of the yard."

He asked other men and none had been watching his wagon. A rolling anger began to push him and he moved off the lot. Pletcher would be down in Ehrenberg, laughing behind his florid brows. Richards hadn't wanted this fight, but he knew he would smash Pletcher.

Mexican words pulled him rudely from his mood and his glance shot into the parked wagons. In the darkness he found a slim figure crowned by its wide hat. "*Amigo,* you will find him inside the Harqua Hala. He ran that way."

"You saw him?"

"*Si!*" The man's hand was passing over his gaunt cheekbone. In the darkness Al fancied a scar running like a crooked trail. This man had been whipped—probably by one of Consolidated's drivers! There was a song of hate behind his hissing breath. "You must watch them, *mi Capitan.* The dog Pletcher has *caballeros* who thirst after blood!"

The scent of a cigar came to him, thin on a wafting breeze. He slid from the other, virtually certain they were being watched. Consolidated was a vile colossus with arms stretching like webs in the night. He suspected the man to be, like himself, an independent freighter—a man who had known the cruel heel of Pletcher in his back. Behind, he caught a dull thud of metal on flesh. A pistol barrel slashing against a man's head. One thick groan stroked the night; the Mexican had been paid for his friendliness!

Al Richards walked on, knowing he could repay his friend best by working through their net. By getting into its center. By getting Pletcher!

HE WAS in the brooding adobe town now. The constant rumble of voices drifted from the dimly lit rooms behind mud fronts. Each room was a hotbed. He caught the filtering odor of *aguardiente* as he passed, the half-savage laughter of Mojave squaws who played the parts usually assigned their white sister harlots in frontier camps. Ehrenberg was too far beyond the outfringe, too deep in its roiling hell, for white women.

Diagonally across the dust-patterned roadway he recognized the *Harqua Hala.* The swing-doors parted outward and the first wide reflector lamp threw its cone across a retreating back. He slid deeper into the shadows of an adobe and watched the man melt in the vague darkness of an alley. *So they know I'm coming,* Al thought. The mystic Indian telegraph of the desert was something white men felt and learned and soon converted for their own use. Al was new to the West, but he could sense death in the town; the streets and the gray mud walls were waiting for violence.

His hand ran down to his Colt, gripped it with cold, nerveless fingers; pushing away from his wall. His boots were sloshing through the ankle deep dust. He walked on, pressing his foe. Relentlessly, he moved into the alley's mouth. A half-lemon moon hung at the alley's far end and he tried to accustom his eyes to this, to fit his man against its light. Yet the passageway seemed still, empty.

He moved deeper through its neck, kicking rubble as he walked. There was no feeling now, no warning. The mental charge which ran between space was dead. He knew only that somewhere before him Pletcher's man waited. An empty box barked his shin-bone and he pitched forward, a curse tripping his lips. In that moment a flare lighted the alley. The tongue of powder leaped almost over his shoulder; he caught the whine of lead close by his ear. Swiftly he threw himself against the adobe's dark bosom.

Again the gunman hunted him out.

The flat crack of his pistol lay against the brooding night and Al moved forward. He glimpsed an irregular shadow against the moon and let drive a shot. The dark form toppled and melted with the alley's uneven floor. He turned, then, retracing his steps to the street. No need go further to inspect the body lying between the rubble; too often he had seen work done by this Colt at close range during the war.

He paused in the alley's mouth, met by a circle of figures. In the lead a thick-shouldered, burly man spoke sharply. "Throw down your gun. I've got to arrest you."

Again warning swept Al. He parried. "Who are you?"

"Town marshal."

"I don't see your badge." He didn't expect Ehrenberg had any law. The code it lived by would be of Pletcher's making.

"Dammit! I said down your gun!"

Al said coolly, "If you want it, come take it."

He walked forward, his Colt half raised at his hip. He saw the man's eyes now; a bull of a head with a gleam in the face. He moved into the crowd, daring the marshal to strike. The blow came where he least expected. Some swift figure had got behind him and he heard the foot-scuff too late. Half-turned, he took a blow on his temple. It sent the street rocking and Al went to his knees. He fought to retain his senses and his mind flashed to the receipt for Creel's goods in his belt. And the gold Creel had given him. This was going to be it.

Others were crowding close and he sensed now he had dropped his pistol. The marshal's boot had caught him in the stomach, tearing the wind from his lungs. They dragged him into the open, dark feet and legs prancing about his head. A wolf pack. He felt hands grappling his middle, lifting his shirt. He fought them off but his arms had grown numb. They got their hands onto the fasteners of his money belt and he groaned, sensing defeat. A pair of bare-skinned legs were before him and he lunged, sinking his teeth into the flesh. And then a second gun fell across his temple.

IT WAS a slanting blow and failed to knock him out. He lay in the dust and gasped for air knowing his blackest hour since the defeat of the South. Against the back of his brain a voice made its vivid impression. A woman's voice!

He turned stiffly on his back and saw Madame La Paz framed in an open doorway. Soft sheen ran out from her shotgun barrel and she said, "Tom, I'll take that belt."

The man who was marshal growled in his throat. "Ma'am, he killed the El Muerto Kid!"

"Give me the belt. I don't want the camp drunk on his gold; I've got wagons and teamsters in town!"

The marshal stared at the glint of her gun and the metal's shine seemed to come alive in his brain until he moved forward and tossed the belt into the adobe's doorway. He paused a moment, staring at her, and she said, "I'll be responsible for him. Let him up."

An angry voice retorted, "He killed one of my men and he'll die!" It was Pletcher moving in through the crowd.

She let her glance slide a trifle. "You make one move, Anse, and I'll

shoot; you better make up your mind!"

Others were pushing up and Al recognized wagoneers that had been friendly at the wagon camp. They carried the limp Mexican between them and one of the freighters said, "The Rebel ain't to blame. One of Pletcher's gunhawks knocked Juan Enriquez over with a gun. I saw it—and Johnny Reb went after the Muerto Kid. Hell, it's good riddance, that's all!"

Pletcher's law was on the rim of space, teetering, ready to disintegrate along with his power. There were enough independent freighters in town to stamp Pletcher down if they pressed for Richards' death. The marshal made a vain effort to hold Pletcher's rule together, but he didn't want a pitched battle that would turn the street into a butcher shop. There were better, safer ways. He yelled hoarsely, "The pair of them go to jail. We'll try them tomorrow!"

Pletcher's men took it up, sensing a fresh sport. Heads nodded along the walk. Madame La Paz shifted her gun and made her attempt to talk them down. Yet it was a helpless task; she couldn't shoot the town, and they pulled Al to his feet and dragged him through the street.

3

EHRENBERG had no jailhouse. They shackled their prisoners to a jail tree that grew in the center of the street close by the river. Al felt the chains fit over his ankle, the pinch of their lock. Beside him lay the half-conscious Mexican and further away a drunken bullwhacker yanked at his chains and yelled.

After a while the crowd drifted. Only one man stood guard near the tree. A vast, dark outline who carried a faint metallic tinkling whenever he moved.

He was bending over the Mexcian and bathing his face from a shallow china basin. Al's blood hammered faster as he identified the mulatto that had been with Pletcher. Moonlight outlined him clearly and Al saw deep, bloody circles on the mulatto's leg and knew this was the calf he had sunk his teeth into.

Juan Enriquez, the wagoneer, groaned. The mulatto let him lie back gently. He turned to Al, whispering, "Keep away from that fellow at the end of the tree; he's a murderer."

Al grimaced and thought about that as he watched the other's dark skin ripple over huge muscles. A bleak dread ate into his belly and his heart was empty. "You're Pletcher's man."

"No. Missy Madeline's man." The mulatto grinned, enamelled teeth flashing. He backed and melted into the dark.

Madeline, Al thought. *This was her name! Madeline Robison—the freighting queen of La Paz!* Even in that dread moment he liked the sound. Her pulsing mystery drove through his blood. Was she forcing a break with Pletcher because she stood four-square for right? Or had she a personal interest in his wallet? And then he recalled the gaunt teamster had said she was honest.

His eyes were focused on the string of Consolidated wagons that reached beyond the limits of town. It came to him that there was activity afoot; the train was making ready to pull out. He saw men come from the bars, wiping hands over their mouths. Some were drivers but here and there were others who moved to the rear of certain wagons and hoisted themselves inside. These were tough, grim-looking, and Al read them as gunmen. He knew a quick respect for Pletcher. Consolidated trains were well guarded from within. How secretly Pletcher's warriors entered the wagon boxes he overlooked.

Now Pletcher came from the *Harqua Hala* with Tabor. The marshal climbed his saddle and Pletcher gave him last minute orders. Tom Tabor,

lawman for Ehrenberg, was one of Pletcher's trail bosses.

Blacksnakes cracked above the mules and a cavvyard of horses swept the street and then the train commenced to roll. Tabor sat beside them, his boots nearly straight in his long stirrup leather. His glance crawled back on the jail tree and his corded face was tight, unrelenting. Al felt the marshal's hate touch him and he ignored it; his attention was all on the train.

Some wagons were heavily loaded and the mules strained deep in their collars. Other wagons sprang forward with scarcely any effort to their teams. He watched the train gain momentum and slowly shake itself into shape. Something about the picture troubled him and his brows knotted in a frown. He recalled now how Pletcher's gunmen had slipped one by one under the canvas. These were the wagons that were underweight. But there were others! He counted swiftly as they filed between the lane of adobes. In the dull light his count reached six and he asked himself bluntly, *why in hell was Pletcher sending empty wagons out from Ehrenberg?*

MADELINE ROBISON had taken advantage of the excitement and slipped back to the jail tree. She stood in its deep shade watching Al. There was a quality about him that was wholesome and good, and in this camp she saw little enough of that. His half-sad smile, the flash of his eye, laid a deep hold on her. She had scanned the contents of his belt, of course; the receipt for Creel's cargo, the gold that was Al's pay for this trip. And one other item.

She had found a letter from General Wade Hampton, whom Al had served under. Hampton wrote how he had returned home to his plantation penniless and found his buildings destroyed, his fortune dissipated. Over a million dollars of his cotton had gone up in smoke during the Union offensives. But he begged Al to begin over anew the way he was, building over the ashes of the past. The men of the South had suffered; they weren't all drunken, embittered gentlemen too proud to work...

A motion of her hand sent the mulatto to the edge of the jail space. She said quietly, "I'm sorry about your wagon."

Al turned and failed to find her against the tree's dark bole. His face was lacking in all softness and he was cold inside. He didn't want their pity. She said more insistently, "Do you believe we burned your wagon?"

"Yes."

"The El Muerto Kid?"

"I think so; he waited in the alley and it was either him or me."

"Things like that have happened before. I'm going along with Anse tomorrow. We have a second train leaving for the Harquahalas at night, when it's cooler. I want to see how Anse handles the men."

"You better not go with that train."

"I've been too close to the books, letting Anse handle the outside work. I don't like it and I want to find out where I stand."

"You'll find you tied fast to a murderous swine."

She ignored him. "Juan and you will be freed from here before morning. Tomorrow, watch for a wagon with your goods ten miles to the east. Your horses will be pulling the outfit and Black Jim will have the reins; I owe you that much."

He thought of the black man and asked, "How does he fit in this?"

"Black Jim? He was my father's man, and Dad set him to watching me." She laughed a little and her throaty, warm tone swept him. "Possibly you don't know this. Before the war Beale brought camels from Tunis and Smyrna, to freight desert supplies from the river. His camel trains didn't work out because they scared everything out of the country and men couldn't handle them; Black

Jim came with the camels from Tunis."

Richards wasn't thinking of Beale or his camels. He was thinking of those wagons loaded with gunmen; of brawny Tom Tabor turning that last look of hate toward the jail tree. He said quietly, "You had better not leave Ehrenberg, Madame La Paz."

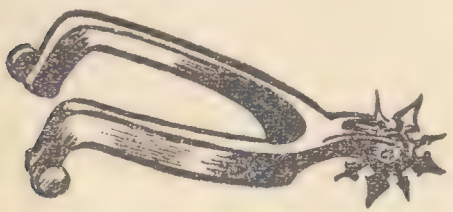
She drew a sucking breath. "Don't *you* call me that, please!"

"All right. But you had better not leave with Pletcher tomorrow—*Madeline!*"

He waited for some response but it was quiet under the tree. He stared at the empty bole and didn't know that she was sliding off in the dark with her breasts stirring strangely. It was quiet a long time before he decided he was alone with Juan Enriquez; with the drunken killer jerking his chains and blasting the night with his angry roar.

●

IT WAS later he heard the faint metallic clanking of Black Jim's bracelets. He searched the inky shadows beside the closest adobe, knowing the mulatto had gone this way. There was an empty wait and then the dull, sickening sounds of human bones crunching inside their flesh covering. Black Jim drifted in dragging a rifle; he dropped it under the tree and his timeless eyes shone on Al.



"Dat fella ain't going to shoot you. Missy Madeline tol' me to watch him."

"One of Tabor's men?" Al said. But the mulatto held his silence, pushing his gaze under the shadows.

A little later Al saw Pletcher stalk from the *Harqua Hala*. He stood before the saloon a brief moment and then darkness swallowed him completely. In the tense stillness Al heard a horse walking behind the adobes. Presently he broke into a run and then Al caught the vague pattern of horse and rider striking into the desert. He lay still under the tree while thoughts clicked together inside his brain. The gunmen hidden inside the wagons, the extra horses going along with the train, Pletcher pointing his horse after his freighters. He thought of Ben Callon's outfit leaving earlier in the evening and it came to him Pletcher had taken along empties because they were going to sack and destroy Ben Callon!

The Mexican's embittered words crashed his ear. *"Por Dios!* The *caballeros* who thirst after blood!"

"Quiet," Al whispered. "Black Jim, can you free us?"

The mulatto towered vast and still beyond, standing with arms folded over his chest. Al said more sharply. "Madeline said we were to be freed before morning; that man racing into the desert was Pletcher!"

Black Jim nodded, yet held his silence. Al pleaded again, "Get me a gun and horse and I'll ride after Pletcher!"

"Amigo," the Mexican whispered, "can you talk him into two horses?"

Black Jim came and stood above them. Suddenly he bent over the bull chain that locked Al's ankle; he spread the chain across one knee.

Al said, "Don't try it. Find a key somehow!"

The mulatto slowly increased his power, bending his back and swaying to his task. He knew no limit to the brawn willed him by his far-away birth place, the timeless strength that was his gift from a strange, exotic people.

Great muscles commenced to rise in his shoulders. His arms throbbed and veins grew like vines about his body. Al's breath rasped against his throat while he watched the links spread and open and then Black Jim dropped

the chain ends and Al was loose. Immediately the mulatto bent over the Mexican.

When both had been freed Black Jim handed the rifle to Al. He whispered in a low, guttural talk, "Wait till I come back. Dat man is no good for Missy Madeline. I'll bring three horses and we all go after him!"

4

THEY RODE from Ehrenberg a half hour later, packing Spencer repeaters and with good horseflesh between their knees. They pointed east, over the well-rutted freighter trail, and Al thought he had never set forth on a mission with men more determined than these. Each had been stung by Pletcher and each held a festering hate in his heart.

Juan Enriquez rode with a loose, free-going swing of the Mexican horseman. His tongue worked incessantly, as though to cast from himself the venom bottled inside. The mulatto rode morosely, with no thought nor care for his horse; he pitched with a choppy roughness in saddle that would be better timed for a camel's sea-swell movements.

Al's thoughts were in Ehrenberg, and he realized with an abrupt wonder that Madeline had gotten in his blood like a fever. The strength of her will, her courage, was something he could not put away. He thought, too, of her tone as it had softened for him, and the light that had come over her face. It hadn't been in his head to hunt a woman in this boiling river port; but the way his thoughts channeled themselves set a stirring to work in his chest.

Since his meeting with Creel, his one purpose had crystallized itself around the chance the mines had given him for a new life. Behind, in the Carolinas, conditions were pitiable and he felt a nagging regret that Hampton, and those others that had been friends, were trying to rebuild a land that was shorn of hope. Here in the West all things were new, fresh, and the scars of the conflict were not insurmountable.

He had meant, since that heartening contact with Creel, to refit his future around the freighting business. With the profits of this first trip he meant to buy a second wagon. With an honest application to business he had looked forward to a third. Now one ruthless sweep by Pletcher had left him ruin; except for the woman he would have paid with his life. Always his mind kept harking back to Madeline Robison. She lay across this desert's nakedness like an untarnished path.

The Mexican's talk slashed his concentration. "Amigos, this is what the swine have done to me! I freight to Fort Tyson when they waylaid me. *Por Dios!* I can yet feel the sting of their lashes! They tie me to the wheel of my wagon. El Muerto, he laugh in my face. 'Dog!' he say, 'yellow cur of the border! Have you not heard that business is for men? The greaser must bend his back to the other man's word, sweat and bleed and be nothing until the day he die!'

"And then the swine Pletcher strike my face with his whip. I spit in his eye and call him gringo and his whip beats my flesh till I fall. *Mi Dios,* I would stand there yet had I not run out of spit!"

Juan Enriquez made the sign of the cross and Al savored the weight of his passión. Of Black Jim he asked, "Why do you ride with us, friend?"

The mulatto sat with his stolid face dead forward. Juan Enriquez's impassioned talk had not touched him. He said thickly, "Dat man make me work like his oxen. He can not have Missy Madeline the way he want; I's gwan to kill him." So simply was reduced into English the trust Freedom Robison had instilled in his man...

●

BEFORE dawn they came to a separation of the trail. Al pulled down his horse and read where a dozen or more mounted men had pointed directly into the hills. Pletcher's gunmen had taken saddle with the end in mind of circling ahead on the regular trail. Al's mind flashed to Ben Callon and he thought, *if we aren't too late!*

They put their horses over this new trail and it was hard sticking to the tracks in this dim light. But the smell of burned canvas, of burning goods, was here to guide them; he knew then Pletcher had already struck.

Dawn came red-flushed and cool across the desert. The first darts of light outlined them and for the first time they rode in real danger. Dawn likewise showed them sign of Pletcher's raiders. Al roweled his horses and urged the others to top speed. A series of low, rimming hills strung before them and they swept into these.

The scent of fire was very strong and they could hear the crack of flames when the breeze freshened. Richards took his men up the dry slope of a near hill. They pulled down near the summit and advanced more slowly. The sight that struck them below was the horror of desert massacre.

The Callon company had camped in a wide basin and this was the way the wagons were standing now. The last tongue-flames were eating the boxes and Pletcher's men were still running between them. Al made out Tom Tabor slouched beside their horses. Dead men and mules lay sprawled in the basin. Ben Callon was among them, his back upturned to the sky and sprouting arrows.

But this was not the work of the Mojaves. Pletcher had brought in his empty wagons and reloaded the most valuable of Callon's cargo. Al let his eyes leap over their horses and counted fifteen.

A cold dread turned his stomach. If he had at his back only a handful of those stout boys who had died under Hampton's banner! He thought he'd cut directly into the center of that basin with sabers flashing. Perhaps a few of his cavalrymen to dash around their right flank and seal the freight road.

He saw Juan Enriquez quit saddle and his day dream blew up. Juan struck his Spencer over the lip of the hill and Al hit the ground. His hand ran over Juan's breech. "Not that way, friend. Too far—and when you miss Pletcher you'll bring his band charging. Our duty now will be to break them up. See if any of Callon's men are still alive."

Juan thought about that and his face worked darkly. "*Amigo,* I think you are right. We will build an Indian smoke and Pletcher thinks we are Mojave."

An officer's strategy came over Al and he clapped Juan's shoulder. "There are three of us, and around us are hills. Let each of us take one and start his fire. Pletcher won't split his men to charge each smoke; they'll pull out before they're encircled."

He patiently explained his theory to Black Jim and then waited for the mulatto's reply. He was afraid Black Jim would elect to fight, and there were a dozen rifles in the basin. Three men could not live to approach the floor of the desert.

It was new to Black Jim but he read soundness behind the plan and nodded. Then Al and Juan pulled out, each in different directions.

From the greasewood Al broke dead branches and built them into a funnel shaped pile. He waited then, for Juan's hill was further than the others. A smoke spiral came first from Black Jim's mound and Al stroked his match to the tinder.

Tabor saw the smoke and called to the others. They stood in a circle, eyes ranging from one fire to another. Pletcher ran after his rifle and it was Tabor who called him back. He pointed to the third smoke drifting toward the basin's entrance. The men

held a quick talk before they leaped to their saddles.

The strategy had worked and they were getting out before redskins closed off their escape. At the main freighter trail Pletcher turned west toward Ehrenberg to make up his next train. Tabor rode the trail the wagons had taken, with his raiders.

THEY CAME into the basin and the gory sight of massacre met them head-on. Mules still screamed their agony and Al took his chance with Pletcher riding back and shot each between its pain glazed eyes. All had arrow shafts stuck from their bodies, and the ground was strewn with lances and Mojave headdress made gory from the easily-obtainable mule's blood. A good piece of theatrical staging—but horrible that white man could do this to another!

He threw his reins and walked afoot. Juan came down beside him. Black Jim had folded his arms stoically across his chest, staring with a hungry, lustful look at the basin's mouth after Pletcher.

Standing over Callon Al felt his blood suddenly quicken. This man still had a faint pulse despite a chest wound and the shaft through his back. Al yelled, "Juan, bring up a canteen!"

They got Ben Callon propped between them and administered as best they could. There was no chance for the freighter's life, but he might linger for hours. He came to with a revolting horror mirrored in his eyes. "Jumped us—" he gasped, "A dozen of them. Pletcher was with them."

"Quiet, Ben," Al said. "Save what strength you can. We're taking you back to Ehrenberg!" Juan threw him a quizzical look and he explained, "You can ride double behind me and we'll tie Callon onto your horse; he's going to hold out until he meets Pletcher."

On the ground Callon's eyes were pools of fire. He got out hoarsely, "You bet I am!"

It was not easy to get Callon on the horse. Pain had its way and his limbs quivered in utter weakness. He passed out before they had him fast to the saddle horn. Out of a wretched stillness Juan spoke, "*Por Dios!* He is one dead man!" and crossed himself.

Al said wonderingly, "What man can do with his body slashed by fire is something I never shall understand; he'll live to Ehrenberg to see Anse Pletcher in hell."

The smell of blood had gotten into Al's horse and in the tense business of hoisting Callon the animal had shied from the burned wagons. Al saw him pass between two round knobs a hundred yards yonder and walked after him. Some inner warning turned him back for his rifle. The horse was just beyond the knobs as he entered. His ears were back, his nostrils dilated, and he was staring at something on his side of the knob; Al thought first of Indians.

The faint rustle of hoofs was his only warning and then Tom Tabor rode between the knobs. His face was hate-packed, the way he had looked at the jail tree last night, and a leveled pistol lay in his hand. Eagerness got into Tabor, blurring his aim. The ball fled past Al's ear and then Al cut upward with the Spencer barrel. He shot once and Tabor clung crazily to his saddle while the gun-roar echoed among the hills. He hit the ground before the banging died.

Al grasped the horse's reins. His own mount was racing across the desert in a blind run. He swung his leg across the horn and then Black Jim rode up and stared on the figure on the ground. Al said slowly, "We should bury him with the others behind the wagon. Yet there's no shovels."

"Dey call it the trail of the graves," Black Jim answered.

Twice on the return to Ehrenberg they stopped to force water between Callon's teeth. He was losing blood under his bandages and sinking fast. Al had small hope, now, of getting him in.

IT WAS high noon when they arrived. The adobes cast flat shadows and the heat of the desert rose from their low roofs, from the trash littered streets. A string of Consolidated freighters lined the north-side, their teamsters checking axle condition and water casks.

Madeline passed between the wagons and Pletcher was coming toward her. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the riders bearing down. Madeline stood still, waiting. Al felt her eyes, the tone that swept her face. Even then in his pitched tension he thought, *when this is over she'll still need a man. Perhaps she'll have me....*

Pletcher's oath fell against the charged street. Al brought his horse around, facing them that way. He called sharply, "Anse, don't look to Tabor for your law; he isn't coming back!"

But Pletcher's eyes were on the third horse; on Ben Callon strapped across its back. Some movement of the animal shifted Callon's head and his eyes were half open, waxy. A ghastly cry choked Pletcher's throat and he turned, running wildly downblock.

Al cut upward with the repeater barrel, found Pletcher racing through his sights. Yet he withheld his finger pressure. Beyond Pletcher loomed the prison tree. He could see last night's murderer still straining at his chains, filling the air with his crazed shouts. He waited, hoping Pletcher would turn to make his stand.

Behind him two Spencers broke the spell and he knew Black Jim and Juan had both fired. He saw Pletcher's body turn rigid in midstride, saw him slide forward beneath the tree. The killer leaped at once, his arms lifted high in the air. His iron chains were beating down, striking Pletcher's head, filling the air with a thudding, ghastly sound.

He turned his gaze and slid off saddle. He walked back to Callon, righting him on his horse. Obliquely he saw Black Jim gesture with his head. Ben Callon had not survived the trip.

Now a shadow darted under his arm and Madeline pressed his chest. She stood against him, shaken yet still. He slid his arm about her waist and drew her close.

He heard her whisper softly, "Al! Al! Last night I was afraid. But when you rode back to me I knew it was all right!"

Al knew it too. He could see a freight line stretching out with Ehrenberg as its hub—into the mountains and desert, east and west. On the wagons would still be painted *Consolidated.* But a vastly different union than the one before!

●

Author's Note:

The Jail Tree was actually at Wickenburg, at the end of the trail. (Ehrenberg may well have had one, too; I don't know.) One night when it was chained full with prisoners they bolted George Sayers to a log embedded near a horse trough in front of the saloon. He was a bull of a man with a bull's loud, bawling voice, and when he was drunk he could wreck the town. They were afraid to lock him with the other prisoners; he might kill them.

He sobered by morning and used his full voice to awaken Wickenburg. He called for them to unlock his chains and let him free, but they were afraid of his anger and men stayed indoors. When he got tired of yelling he climbed up onto his feet and began lifting on the chain that held him. The log was stout enough that freighters fastened their hitches onto it, never dreaming that it could be lifted. George Sayers got his muscles working; his big back heaved and his arm muscles strained and his legs spread wider and deeper in the mud.

He shifted the log and got it to moving. When he had it free he sucked a full breath and then hoisted the log to his shoulder; a huge, massive trunk that men stared at. He carried it along with him, chain clanking, into the nearest saloon. It thudded onto the bartop and George Sayers stood up before the counter. "Give me a shot of redeye," he ordered.

The bartender took one look at the tree trunk; at the man chained fast to his counter. He reached after a bottle and George Sayers got his morning eye-opener.

—W. Edmunds Claussen

●

There was no chance of finding Snoopy Sam Tolliver in the desert; he knew it better than any lizard there. But Snoopy Sam had an insatiable curiosity . . . perhaps if something puzzled him, he'd come out.

"Snoopy got to inquirin' a little too damn close into Masterson's dealin'."

• COFFIN in the SKY •

By J. E. Hungerford

IN A BACK room of the Honky-Tonk Saloon and Gambling Parlor, two grim-faced, tight-lipped, cold-eyed men sat facing each other over a gaming table. One of the poker players was "Snoopy Sam" Tolliver, desert prospector. The other was "Baldy" Masterson, professional cow-town card-sharp.

All of a sudden the back-room silence was shattered by hot words, profanity, the harsh scraping of chair-legs on the pine-board floor . . . the thundering blast of a Colt .45.

The next minute, a door opened and banged shut on creaky hinges. A dead man sat alone at the gaming-table, eyes staring glassily up at the cracked-plaster ceiling.

Quarter of an hour later, Sheriff "Mart" McCollum bent over the corpse in the *Honky-Tonk* rear room, peering into close-set, puffy-lidded eyes that had squinted greedily over many a cowtown gambling table. The gross, fat-bellied body of the dead man slumped saggingly in a chair, arms dangling limply at sides, pasty-skinned, whisky-veined face tilted gruesomely upward.

"Just how come this here Baldy

Masterson card-slicker to get dry-gulched in your gambiin' parlor?" McCollum questioned "Dink" Morrison, owner of the *Honky-Tonk*. "An' talk straight, Mister Morrison—this bein' the third killin' in this back room since you took over the caffay."

Dink had no love for law-officers, but he was on the spot, and there was no way of evading the issue. "Well—er—it was like this, Sheriff," said Dink out of a corner of his crooked slit of a mouth. "Snoopy Sam Tolliver got to inquirin' a little too damn close into Baldy Masterson's dealin'. They had been bickerin' over the game a right smart before Snoopy cut loose with his hog-leg. I was comin' into the back room with some whiskies, when Snoopy an' Baldy busted out quarrelin' an' cussin' each other. *Pronto,* Baldy went for his gun. Snoopy beat him to the draw, quick as skat, drillin' Baldy plumb through the heart—if he's *got* one. Baldy flopped back in his chair, like you're seein' him now, Sheriff."

"Yeah?" McCollum was eying Dink skeptically. "And what did you an' Tolliver do then, Mister Morrison?"

Dink's crooked slit of a mouth twitched. "Me and Snoopy stepped outside the joint, into the alley, an' Snoopy says to me: 'The damn cheatin' tinhorn tried to palm off an extra ace on me, Dink. I called the sneakin' tinhorn's hand... an' you seen the sidewinder go fer his gun. I killed him in self-defense, an' he got what's been comin' to him fer a long time. You tell Sheriff McCollum that, when he starts questionin' you, Dink. That I blasted Baldy in self-defense.' Snoopy Tolliver then forked his pinto hoss an' vamosed. That's all I know about this here killin', an' it's the truth."

SHERIFF McCOLLUM lifted the dead gambler out of his chair, laid him on the floor and folded his arms across his fat, flabby chest. Then he remarked dryly, "If Snoopy Tolliver hadn't been so damned curious an' inquisitive, he wouldn't have caught Baldy card-sharpin' him, an' committed this murder. Curiosity is Tolliver's worst failin'. That's what got him his nickname, 'Snoopy Sam'; he's always been stickin' his damned long nose into somethin' or other! That's how he got his nose-bridge busted; he poked a finger against a big mole on a stranger gent's face to see what it *felt* like. The stranger hauled off an' busted Snoopy on the beak. Another time, Snoopy pinched a feller's bulgin' upper-arm to find out if the bulge was muscle or fat. It was *muscle,* all right; Snoopy got a busted jaw for his snoop-nosin' that time!

"An' now he's gone an' killed a man, because he snooped around an' turned up a crooked ace. Self-defense or no self-defense, Snoopy Sam Tolliver is goin' to stand trial for murder!"

Dick Morrison looked skeptical. "*Meanin'*, Snoopy will stand trial for murder *if* you can catch him, an' get him into a courtroom, Sheriff. By now Snoopy is half way acrost the Arizona Desert; it's gonna take some smart work to round up that dam sand-lizard! No man knows the sand an' cactus country better than Tolliver does! When he ain't loafin' around San Marcos drunk an' gamblin', he's snoopin' about out there in the desert prospectin' for more gold to gamble an' get drunk on here in San Marcos."

Dink Morrison was mistaken in supposing that Snoopy Sam Tolliver had left town for the desert directly after the gambling-parlor killing At that very moment, Snoopy was entering the San Marcos Cattlemen's Bank on important business.

It was the noon hour, and the Cattlemen's Bank was empty of customers. Ambling up to the cash window, Snoopy peered squintily into the teller's cage.

Teller Steve Sackett, alone on duty in the bank, glanced up from some currency he was counting into a jutting jawed, swarthy-skinned face, with a droopy black moustache and close-set black eyes. A noxious whisky breath wafted unpleasantly to the teller's nostrils.

"Howdy, Mr. Tolliver," he greeted crisply. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Snoopy Sam chuckled. "I'm jest curious to know how much cash-money you've got in that stack of *dinero* you're countin', Mister Sackett," he drawled. "I'm bettin' there's close to three-hundred fifty bucks in that there stack."

Teller Sackett smiled tolerantly. "You're not far wrong, Mr. Tolliver; fact is, there's three hundred an' thirty dollars in this stack of *dinero*. How come you're interested in knowing the amount, if I may ask, sir?"

"Because," Snoopy Sam shoved a Colt .45 through the cash window—"I'm takin' that *dinero* along with me, when I leave the bank, Mister Sackett!" he gritted. "I'm needin' some quick cash! Dish out that mazuma pronto, you damn, squint-eyed dude!"

Teller Sackett's pale, angular face seemed to freeze. His skin changed from pale to a sickly yellow, like a horned-toad's belly. "You—you don't mean what you're saying, Tolliver!" he blurted. "You—you're jokin', or—or you're drunk!"

"I ain't jokin'—but mebbe I am drunk!" rasped Snoopy Sam. "Hand over that cash *muy pronto*, you snifflin' tenderfoot, er I'll blast hell outa you!"

Teller Sackett made a jerky stab for the gun in his money drawer... and got a blast of lead in his chest that spun him half around; sprawled him thuddingly on the money-cage floor.

A woman customer, entering the bank at the moment gave vent to a terrified screech, and fainted. Snoopy Sam Tolliver scooped up the *dinero* from the cage counter, stuffed it into his pockets and loped out of the Cattleman's Bank.

Forking his pinto horse at the hitching-rack he headed down San Marcos' main street at a lope. His next stop on important business was at "Uncle Jed" Hubler's general merchandise store.

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WHEN SHERIFF McCOLLUM learned of the Cattlemen's Bank killing and robbery, he didn't seem in any particular hurry to pick up Snoopy Tolliver's trail.

Nor did he seem in any great haste to pursue the murdering thief when informed that Snoopy Sam had stuck up Uncle Jed Hubler's general-store and helped himself to cash, groceries and ammunition. McCollum knew it would be time wasted to attempt to round up Tolliver in the mazes of the Arizona Desert badlands—that desert-rat prospector would be harder to catch than a flea in a cactus patch. Nevertheless, he was determined that Snoopy would be brought to trial, somehow, for the murder of Baldy Masterson and Steve Sackett.

In describing the hold-up of his store to Sheriff McCollum, Uncle Jed Hubler waxed profanely eloquent.

"The danged stick-nosin', thievin sidewinder come bustin' in here durin' the noon-hour!" he roared. "An' the first thing the damn rattler wanted to know was—how come I didn't *wash* my store winders oftener? When I asked the skunk what business that was of his'n, says he: 'Your winders are so damn filthy dirty, folks passin' by the store can't see me, holdin' you up, an' call the Sheriff!' Then the thievin' coyote pulled a gun on me an' helped hisself to my groceries, cash an' ammunition."

McCollum chuckled raspily. "I'll bet by-damn you'll keep your store windows clean from right now on—eh, Jed?"

"You're dang-blasted tootin' I will!" roared Uncle Jed ragingly.

Stepping to the store entrance, McCollum shaded his eyes and looked off in the direction of the desert. By now Snoopy Sam was well on his way into the lonely land he called home. Glancing skyward, the Sheriff saw a flock of buzzards flying low in the shimmering heat west of San Marcos.

"Those beady-eyed scavengers of death are always lookin' fer some-

thin'," he remarked to Hubler grimly. "They's plenty keen-eyed, those birds; they can spot a fresh-killed corpse for miles. An' speakin' of 'lookin fer somethin',' it's a mighty peculiar trait, Uncle Jed. Everybody is always 'lookin' fer somethin'. That's what made *me* a crook-huntin' lawman, I reckon."

"Yep, we're all hankerin' to get somethin'," agreed Uncle Jed. "Like a cat at a mouse-hole."

McCollum turned away from the doorway. "That reminds me, Uncle Jed. I'm needin' a couple of items from your store stock. Fetch me some glue, a ball of strong hemp cord, and a quarter pound of small nails. An' don't ask me what it's for. It's none of your business, you squint-eyed, inquisitive ol' skinflint!"

Snoopy Sam Tolliver awakened from a nightmare-tormented slumber, with a jerk. The evening before he had made camp by a desert waterhole, some miles from San Marcos. He would have put more miles between himself and the scene of his killings, but his pinto horse had suffered a slight leg injury. The horse was his only means of reaching safety with speed, and he couldn't risk forcing the animal to travel further until it rested.

Snoopy Sam was badly in need of rest himself. After three days of drunken celebration in San Marcos, which had culminated in murder and robbery, his nerves were ajangle. He had tried to sleep off a mean whisky hangover, but torturing dreams had jerked him awake again and again in fearful apprehension. His throat was bone-dry, as raspy as sandpaper; his brain and stomach felt like they were on fire.

In his speedy getaway from San Marcos, he had neglected to provide himself with some much-needed eye-openers. Burning with thirst, he crawled to the edge of the waterhole and drank long and wolfishly.

Getting wobblingly to his feet, he surveyed the desert sands, pulsing with shimmering heat-waves under a hell-hot sun. There was no sign of a sheriff's posse, or of any living being.

"That dang pussyfootin' law-shark, McCollum, ain't goin' to ketch up with me!" snarled Snoopy. "The Law might let me down easy for killin' that cheatin' card-sharp, Masterson, but I'd git the rope fer the Cattlemen's Bank killin'. If that dude teller, Sackett, hadn't reached fer his gun he would still be dishin' out cash to customers. The Law ain't goin' to git me, though. When I git where I'm goin' t' hell with the Law!"

Snoopy wrangled some grub from his saddlebags and wolfed it down with sullen distaste. Some strong black coffee would clear whisky fumes from his brain and steady his nerves, but to start a fire would be an invitation to a posse to come and get him.

FINISHING his meal, Snoopy rolled a smoke. Puffing the weed, he tried to concentrate on the immediate future but his thoughts were confused, muddled. Right then he would have given every cent of his bank murder-money to be standing at Morrison's *Honky-Tonk*, hoisting a shot of rot-gut.

Glancing upward, Snoopy saw a buzzard circling low in the sky above the waterhole. "Damn scavenger of the devil would be pickin' meat off my bones *pronto,* if it had a chance!" he growled. "Right now, them greedy eyes is lookin' fer a flesh *fiesta*!"

Snoopy shuddered, remembering how Baldy Masterson had looked when he had shot him. The puffy, fat-jowled, pasty face. The close-set, heavy-lidded eyes staring glassily at him in fixed horror. Then he thought of Steve Sackett's thin, fear-frozen face, as the lead slug had torn into the bank-teller's chest.

A rattling whir, near the waterhole, diverted Snoopy's mind from his morbid cogitations. He saw a rattlesnake's mottled head lash out from behind a

sandstone cropping and nab a small hoptoad. One gulp, and the hoptoad was no more.

Snoopy shifted his gaze in disgust, and his eyes focused on a lizard, perched on a nearby rock, catching insects.

"That's how that sneakin' Lawshark, McCollum, would like to git me!" croaked Snoopy. "I—I guess I better be pushin' on!"

Getting shakily to his feet, Snoopy darted apprehensive glances in all the directions, but there was nothing in sight to alarm him. The silence of the desert was stifling, oppressive. He hated to leave the waterhole shade and plunge into the blazing inferno surrounding him. His craving for whisky was now intense; his brain felt like molten metal in his skull. Every nerve in his body was on edge.

The pinto horse, dozing in the shade, suddenly jerked up its head with a raucous snort. Snoopy leaped back startled, cursing; almost plunged himself into the waterhole. He bemeaned the horse viciously for throwing a scare into him, then shakily climbed aboard the animal. "Git movin', you dang chunk of buzzard bait!" he snarled. "We got to git where we're goin' *pronto*!"

As the pinto horse moved forward, away from the waterhole, Snoopy suddenly jerked erect in his saddle. For a full minute he sat rigid, motionless, staring at something he saw in bulgy-eyed amazement.

Off to the south, silhouetted against the brazen blue of the sky, was an object that looked like a small flying coffin. The thing was shaped like a burial-casket, and it was black. The thing floated gruesomely, uncannily in the ether—a death-box, the like of which Snoopy had seen only at funerals and in undertaking parlors.

Wheezy gasps issued from the fugitive's throat as he stared dazedly skyward. The thing he was seeing *couldn't* be—and yet, by-damn, there it was! Snoopy rubbed red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes and looked again to make sure he wasn't just imagining what he believed he saw.

"Bah!" he exploded croakily. "A coffin floatin' in the desert sky! I'm —I'm plumb *loco!* That rotgut whisky I been drinkin' in town has—has done somethin' to my brain!"

As Snoopy stared skyward with fear-stricken eyes, the death-box, floating placidly in the ether, suddenly began to sway up and down; bobbing and gyrating crazily.

Clutched in the grip of superstitious terror, Snoopy knew he was either a victim of distorted imagination, or that the thing he was seeing was a supernatural omen, warning him of impending death. He clutched at his throat as if a hangman's rope-noose was strangling him.

CONSUMING curiosity to have a closer look at the flying death-box; to see if it was actually *there*, or if his addled, whisky-inflamed brain was fooling him, suddenly possessed Snoopy. Lashing his horse to a gallop, he plunged southward over the sands, cursing himself for a loco fool, yet unable to curb the morbid inquisitiveness that urged him on.

Reaching a spot near a tall, dense clump of mesquite bushes, almost directly under the flying death-box, Snoopy halted his horse, and gazed skyward until his neck ached and his eyes were almost blinded by sunglare.

There was no doubting now that the "flying coffin" was actually *there*; not an imaginary object or supernatural omen, as he had believed when viewing it from the waterhole.

The thing *looked* like...

Snoopy jerked his head around, and for the first time he noticed a long strand of cord ascending skyward from the dense clump of mesquite bushes. "It's—it's the devil!" he blurted. "Who else would be flyin' a kite, 'way out here in the desert!"

From the depths of the mesquite bushes came a gruff answer. "*I'm* flyin' the kite, Mr. Tolliver!"

Snoopy whirled in his saddle, stabbing for his gun-holster.

"Keep the shootin'-iron leathered!" warned the gruff voice. "You're covered! I don't want to pack a *dead man* back to San Marcos, Mister Tolliver!"

Out from the mesquite bushes stepped Sheriff Mart McCollum. Swiftly he disarmed and handcuffed the killer.

"How in hell come you to be out here in the desert flyin' a kite that—that looks like a coffin?" croaked Snoopy.

Sheriff McCollum chuckled raspily. "I'll satisfy your burnin' curiosity, Mister Tolliver. After you killed Baldy Masterson an' Steve Sackett, an' lit out, I knew it would be tough work to catch up with a desert rattler like you, an' trap him. Then I saw some buzzards flyin' over San Marcos, an' they give me an idea. Those birds of death made me think of a coffin—a *flyin'* coffin. So I got some supplies at Uncle Jed Hubler's store an' built me a box-kite, paintin' it black. I figgered if a kite that looked like a coffin caught your eye—an' a feller can see a mighty long distance out here in the desert, your infernal curiosity would do the rest! Instead of huntin' you all over the Arizona Badlands, I jest staked out in the shade of these mesquite bushes, flew my kite, an' waited fer you to show up.

"You always was an inquisitive damn fool," finished the sheriff. "And this time you stuck your neck out far enough to put it right in a rope-noose! Crawl aboard that pinto hoss, an' let's git headed back to San Marcos."

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THE OUTLAW WHO HAD FRIENDS

Fact Feature by Wayne D. Mote

NOT ALL of the Western badmen were outcasts of society. As a matter of fact, plenty of outlaws were more respected than the law itself. This was especially true in Missouri, a state left starving by the ravages of the Civil War. Here, sodbusters and little ranchers who were down-and-out would feed and shelter an outlaw on the dodge in return for a small cut of his swag. In this way, the outlaw became the friend of society rather than the enemy; and having public feeling on their side proved to the oulaws' advntage more than once.

A colorful example of this was the case of Frank James, brother of Jesse, the most talked-about bandit of all time. A plain, neighborly fellow, Frank was making a living for his family by tilling the soil when Governor Chittenden of Missouri decided the outlaw should be tried for his crimes. So the governor put up a $10,000 reward for Frank James, dead or alive.

Frank, a well-thought-of citizen in his community, didn't like the idea of being branded as a wanted outlaw; he decided to give himself up and either take the consequences or clear his name of it. Instead of going to his fall plowing on the morning of October 5, 1882, Frank went to the state capitol.

He walked into Governor Chittenden's office and laid his two Frontier Colts on the astonished governor's desk. "I'm Frank James," he said; "I hear you've got out a rewad for me, so I'm surrendering to you and claiming the reward money myself."

After a great deal of technical wrangling, Frank collected his own reward from the state of Missouri. With the money, he hired several of the best lawyers in the state to defend him.

During the following year, the Missouri badman was tried for a dozen or more train and bank robberies by

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Sheriff Spandler was in love with Sheila; he'd knuckle down when she demanded a lynching . .

He'd had his revenge on "Old Cain" Hurst, and now Van Strothman plotted his vengeance on Hurst's hellcat daughters, who'd kicked Van around for years. And if all this involved the lynching of an innocent man, Strothman would cheerfully settle for such a price!

THE DEVIL'S TWIN DAUGHTERS

By Rex Whitechurch

VAN STROTHMAN, beady-eyed, malevolent, slid a long thin finger behind his celluloid collar—he always wore celluloid collars—and watched the posse leave town. Clint Hurst—Old Cain—was dead. The Cottonwood banker was as dead as he would be in Hades, and Van Strothman had no doubt about Hades being his destination. He had explained to Strothman long ago how he hoped that his position in life would give his two daughters distinction. Sheila and Keila, spawned by the devil in an idle moment, were beautiful and wicked; the hellcat twins, Van Strothman called them.

Van Strothman, Old Cain's slave! He had been insulted, ridiculed and tortured by those black-haired imps. He had been slapped by Sheila and kicked brutally on the shins by Keila, and Old Cain Hurst had laughed about it.

But Cain was dead now, and it was a different story; it was Strothman's turn to laugh. He did, silently and deeply within him, standing on the bank's steps and watching the thundering horses streak through the narrow street of false fronts. The dust boiled and spat like a crazy feline.

Those devil riders whipped around the first turn in the road, their ebony-hued hair streamed out behind them; they bent forward in their saddles and lashed their horses with cruel whips, outrunning the very best riders, including young Sheriff Jeff Spandler. They craved the blood of the culprit; they would never be satisfied until they got it and helped to draw it from his veins. The cloppity-clop of the running horses dimmed in its din and soon the town was peaceful again. Oh they'd get him, all right. Van Strothman knew that, but he knew something else.

They would never get the jewel

casket that Cain had placed such a high value upon—not in this world. They'd never recover that big fist full of diamonds and rubies that Cain had promised to divide equally between his spitfire daughters when he died. They had been greedy for those, had the devil-worshipping brunettes, with their imperious airs and their august chins and their deep bosoms and their slim figures, their bodies always slim and clad in the finest of Chinese silks that Old Cain could import. Van Strothman had seen their bare, walnut colored skin when they were growing up and he had held them on his lap; he had help change them when they were wet, because he had always been Old Cain's slave, his janitor, his house keeper and his doctor and his cashier and his horse wrangler.

It dated back twenty-two years, and it began right after the Civil War, when Hurst had caught Strothman with twenty thousand dollars in gold in his custody, after Van had held up the Wells Fargo stage. Hurst had found him wounded, had taken care of him and had—at the same time—taken care of the money; Strothman had never recovered use of his right leg so that he would be a match for Hurst in a physical encounter. And always there was Strothman's fear of the man, and fear of prison and even the rope, because he had accidentally killed the express guard.

Yes, Old Cain had gloated over him and he had put that twenty thousand to good use—his own personal use. Then had come the day when Van Strothman, unable to endure it another hour, had lashed out in well-planned fury; right now those jewels rested in his carefully selected place of concealment, cached there along with other valuables he had meant to ride off with when the time was ripe. Those gems had been taken from the safe the night before, but not even Old Cain had missed them. All day Strothman had waited for banker, a sucker, and when the man had come in, Van had clouted him on the head and left him lying senseless in the floor, while he removed the money from the safe and bound a mask over the sucker's face.

Old Cain had walked in and a knife had found his ribs; he had died without a sound, although Van Strothman would have sworn he read enough profanity in Hurst's bestial countenance to fill a good-sized dictionary. He had slipped down, limply, to lie beside the bandit.

THOSE GIRLS had been coming to see Clint every morning, to try to persuade him to give them the jewels; Strothman had listened to them as they brow-beat and cudgeled the old devil around. He liked it; Old Cain loved to be on the receiving end of their abuse.

There wasn't anything those two beautiful women wouldn't do for the gems their father had salvaged from his early days of piracy. They had often said as much; and now Strothman thought of their willingness to pay heavily for the diamonds and the rubies and a thin, wicked grin creased the corners of his mouth.

They would overhaul the bandit and would return him to the county jail. He must have come to while lying there beside the dead man and, discovering the mask on his face, hadn't taken time to investigate; he'd dashed away. The twins had seen him, and they had run into the bank. Strothman thought of how at the moment of the discovery of the crime he had been partaking of a bottle of cold beer at the *Cottonwood Cafe*.

Jim Brazo had certainly made it worse for himself by running. For days young Brazo had hounded Old Cain for a small loan and for days Hurst had enticed him along. Eventually Brazo would have obtained the loan; it had been Old Cain's way of having fun; he'd enjoyed playing with a prospective client like that.

So Van could sit back now and watch the show. The cache at the old Hurst cabin where he had stored

so long and patiently for the subject of his hatred, before Old Cain had entered the banking business. "I've paid for every stitch of clothes them women are wearing," he muttered to himself. "Someday it's going to be my pleasure to rip that silk away and—" He did not allow himself to dwell upon the decision he had made; he would wait until the day came. Just as he had bided his time and waited for Old Cain to catnap and the right sucker to come along.

Strothman had his own particular ideas about everything. It wasn't the soldiers who worked hard that won the wars; it was the generals who didn't work at all. It wasn't brawn that achieved the miracles, that overcome equal physical opposition; it was brain, that subtle, delicate instrument that thousands of years of development had risen in its power a few small steps above the brain of the four-footed beasts of the wilds. For years Strothman's body had been the slave, but not his brain. His brain had never been enslaved; it was subject only to his own orders and dictates and he had never cringed from the whip or the physical suffering visited upon him by the man who called himself Strothman's master. He had often laughed about that. As if anyone living could master Van Strothman. He knew when his brain had endured enough his brain would lash out, just as it had lashed out in cold fury at the master of his body, that other living master who had made him twist in agony from the brutality of his hand.

Van thought of one thing and it alone completely possessed him. He would make the twin imps of hell pay; he would make them squirm and crawl on their bellies and grovel like worms. But he would be subtle about it. They would sell themselves to the few minutes of torture for those gems. He was aware of their way of thinking. Sheila and Keila had been trained by their selfish, unrelentless father to worship those gems that Strothman and only Van Strothman, could give them.

He lived over in pleasurable anticipation his own physical indulgence in this passion. The racked, bent body, not capable of resisting attack in brawn, incapable of offering even fair competition where his enemies were concerned, lifted his figure into a straight, military erectness and defiance. That weird luster of his eyes became more accentuated. They seemed to crawl back into his head to conceal themselves behind the curtains his uncanny brain had manufactured for him.

HE SAW the posse returning with their prisoner. He loitered on the walk until they had cantered up the street. Vortexing dust, boiling and choking, enveloped them, those physical slaves in their soiled clothes, the acidic stench of them despoiling the air. They had their man. His skinny hand crawled up to his celluloid collar.

Van Strothman asked no questions; he remained aloof from the crowd. But he heard all the details as the sheriff was locking up his prisoner. There had been no exchange of shots; the captive had given no battle. When outraced by the dead man's twin daughters, Jim Brazo had meekly submitted to them. Sheila and Keila had left the posse behind; they were holding Brazo at the point of Sheila's carbine when the others reached them.

Jim Brazo had made no incriminating statements. He said he would talk when it was time; he did not care to discuss the matter now. Nobody doubted the young man's guilt; he'd been seen fleeing from the bank, masked.

"I'm glad of it," said Van Strothman to Jess Steele, one of his best friends, a patron of the bank. "But mebbe Spandler will have something to say about how Brazo is to die. Please don't overlook the sheriff; he's an up and coming young man. He had the courage of a lion. It wouldn't be easy to subdue him once he was aroused."

"No, I reckon not. But they'll lynch him," Steele maintained. "I ain't no hand for lynch law myself, but I guess if he's guilty there ain't a whole lot of use waitin'. The only thing is—they hung the wrong man once. You recollect the Barnaby case. Lee Barnaby was accused of shooting Jim Rooker in the back and after they'd lynched Lee, they found out it was Rooker's half brother, Bill Ellis."

"You can't dispute Brazo's guilt, though," Strothman said, with an uneasy sigh. "The evidence is air-tight."

"Seemed that way in the Barnaby case, too," Steele declared.

"I'm sure Spandler won't let them lynch Brazo," said Van Strothman.

Then he heard something that consoled him. "Yes, but just remember what Sheriff Jeff Spandler thinks of Sheila. When a young fellow's in love, Van, ain't much can cut in to show him right from wrong. Sheila will get the job done. Jim Brazo's mother and sisters are all he's got to help him, and they don't have no money except what the girls make teaching them hill schools. No—right now I'd say Brazo's a lost goslin' and he'd just as well toughen his neck up so th' noose won't make no calluses when them devil gals fit the rope around his Adam's Apple."

It was the longest and most ardent speech Van Strothman had ever heard Jess Steele make and he was deeply interested in what it expressed.

The crowd was milling around them. There was no end of threats and some of the mob was in for a quick settlement of the case. It would be a month before the traveling circuit judge would visit Cottonwood and that was too long to wait to hang a cowardly killer like Jim Brazo.

JEFF SPANDLER appeared in the doorway with the yellow lamplight relieving the gloom of the iron cells behind him. "Gentlemen," he said in a firm, clear voice, "go on to your homes and think about this thing all night; try to imagine yourselves in a predicament such as the one that now confronts Jim Brazo. He hasn't ever been in trouble before; he's got a clean record, like most of you fellows standing out there right now. You don't change a man's character overnight. There's something strange about this thing and I'm not ready yet to say Brazo killed Mister Hurst."

Van Strothman caught his breath, held it, and for five minutes stood as immobile as an iron figure in a city park. He was surrounded by anger-filled men, whose peaceful existence had been suddenly torn asunder, men who had kept the man-made laws and conducted themselves as respectable citizens. Many of them did not think in terms of violence; but because the atmosphere was rife with it they were incapable of warding off the contagion. They were beady with sweat, alert, diabolical in the stone carved expressions of their faces. Van Strothman managed to speak. He would have to imply, rather than state plainly, the ominous thoughts in his mind.

"Old Clint Hurst is dead. I never had a better friend. For twenty years and more he did everything to help me. Others of you, too, have had his help. He has aided all of us in our moments of distress; it wasn't because he owed us anything, but he had a big heart and he felt sorry for us. I know every man in this crowd, Spandler; so do you. They abhor the fact that Clint isn't with us now—that he's lying stiff on the cooling board. The knife-wound Jim Brazo inflicted upon him is a ghastly thing to behold; it's awful to see in the lamplight. I'm no man to apply lynch law, but if there ever was a case that called for it, we've got it right here in Cottonwood tonight. I'd be mortified if something wasn't done about this thing before Old Clint's blood got too cold."

Strothman was proud of his speech; it wasn't everyday he got a chance to talk like that. He stepped

back into the shadows of a wooden awning, then, to watch the effect of his oration. It came instantaneously and dramatically; it came with the abrupt stirring of the mob and with Sheila Hurst running toward the jail door. Her sister was not far behind her. They screamed shrilly at Jeff Spandler. Sheila swept Jeff's arms away from the door.

"Get back, Jeff," she cried. "Somebody bring a rope; I'll put it around Jim Brazo's neck with my own hands."

"No, you'll let me do it," Keila shouted. Her voice was full of the hate that poisoned her. She was sodden wet with sweat; her deep bosom was silhouetted. Her black hair streamed out behind her. Some of the more impressionable men gave her demoniacal support. Voices rose in disdain, mocking the minion of the law. They said he was too young to know what was best for the community. They said a lot of things.

Strothman knew Jim Brazo was innocent and guileless and respectable. But he practically was swinging from a tree now. Yet— for some invisible reason that defied analysis at the moment Sheriff Jeff Spandler stayed firmly put. He wrestled with Sheila and he kept her between him and Keila. The latter was dripping wet with sweat, too; her face was dusty and her legs above her stockings were smeared with the dirt the prairie wind was blowing against her. But they were unaware of their almost unpresentable appearance, either that or they didn't care. They wanted to be stared at and made over and yearned for. And in this way they were having more influence on the mob behind them.

Nobody emerged from the crowd to lend Jeff Spandler a hand; none of his deputies was present, and it wasn't ten minutes until the mob had their prey and were running and stumbling with him across the street and along the high board walks. Sheila had put the noose on him all right; Strothman had seen her do it. Gloating was in her face and the base cruelty of her was apparent in her features. The scuffling, rushing crowd reminded Van Strothman of a pack of wolves that had attacked his wagon team one blizzardy night on the plains. The young man, handsome even in his turmoil, said not a word, struck not a blow, seemed resigned to his fate. They pulled his hair and kicked him on the legs and back and in the stomach, and they struck him with clubs and gunbarrels. Blood dripped from the end of his nose onto his chin and snaked over this to crawl down his throat and onto his shirt. It was like a scarlet arrow reaching for his heart.

BUT THE hanging bee was not a success; there was an intervention. It was the most miraculous, the most startling and fantastic of all interventions. Van Strothman gaped and glowered, curtained his furtive eyes with those transparent but concealing curtains which he had contrived for such purposes; but inwardly he quaked and swore. The mob had just about reached the designated place chosen for the execution and Jim Brazo was just about out on his feet, although he hobbled along in silence, still without complaint, although a dozen bestial hands were clawing at him all the time.

Sheila and Keila were right in there pitching and they were getting more than their money's worth. They revealed themselves as they were; they definitely proved that Old Cain had failed as a father. His own lop-sided guidance had destroyed what little good they might have inherited from their better ancestors. Their white cotton shirtwaists were stained—even dyed—with the blood of the helpless quarry. Van Strothman's hand gently found his celluloid collar.

The prisoner had always been regarded as a nice, quiet young man, without ostentatious drawbacks—which is seldom the case with young

men upon whom nature has showered all the godlike beauty at her command. He had been honest and reliable. Van Strothman knew he was still honest and reliable. His background was clean and honorable. He'd had a good father and he'd had a good mother. Had Strothman been a man of lesser brutal instincts he would have weakened.

The skeleton of death was dancing in the dust of the street and running along beside the captive and gesturing with all the foolish pomp and ceremony of a king's jester. The harsh boot-heels of the crowd were scarring the old planks of the sidewalk with their nailheads. And there was the infrequent lifting of Sheila's voice and the raucuous screaming of Keila who were as blind with lust as the perspiring men who oscillated with them; they were all worn and battered from the cudgeling of those who fought to get closer to the prisoner so they might strike a few blows of their own or pinch away a little flesh. The low, flat and hump-backed roofs of the falsefronts seemed to sink closer to the steamy earth in their shame and humiliation.

And coming with the intervention, as Van Strothman saw it, was a definite threat to his own security. Fifty rough-garbed riders thundered through the narrow thoroughfare, guns rattling, diabolical in their squeaking leather saddles, blatant in their hellish voicings of wrath. Their horses reared and waltzed and thudded and thumped, trampling those of the mob who had been too slow in seeking shelter; those who remained on their feet were switched away with the remorseless lashings of hard swung quirts. More blood and more grime and suddenly and miraculously the prisoner was free. Jim Brazo stood on tottering legs, looking bewildered, half dazed, blood clotting in his mouth and congealing on his firm jaw. Black, angry-looking blood. Then strong arms hoisted him and set him down in a clattering buckboard, and in less than five minutes the irate cavalcade and the bouncing vehicle completely vanished in cannon puffs of mocking, jeering dust.

VAN STROTHMAN had taken no part in the assault upon the captive; he had left this to the maddened crowd. And even in his distress he gloated at sight of the pink welts upon the faces of Sheila and Keila who had been switched by the indignant sodbusters who had come to the rescue of their friend and neighbor. He delighted in their humiliation and their helpless fury. And while they groaned and moaned, a broad brooding grin twisted the thin corners of Van Strothman's mouth.

He heard them trying to assemble themselves into some degree of order; Sheriff Jeff Spandler was quite prominent in assisting them in their efforts. He had his deputies with him now, barked orders and cleared the street. He was so fully successful in this that within twenty minutes the sidewalks were deserted and silence reigned and no living thing moved in the street except for the worried minion of the law and his dozen subordinates. Never had Cottonwood witnessed such a tableau as the one just presented. In the wake of it would come an everlasting memory. It surely must've seemed to those frustrated citizens of the town, unearthly, with the hand of the Lord somewhere close by. Their confidence in the guilt of young Jim Brazo had been abruptly shattered and more than one of them had a sneaking feeling and would feel humiliated for days to come.

Strothman retired to the bank; here he sat and planned the climax, not caring now what happened, just as long as it didn't happen to him. He felt himself capable of wresting the chestnuts from the fire. They had no reason to suspect him; he had covered his tracks too well.

The law would improvise a way to deal with those who were Jim Brazo's earnest defenders. Sheriff Spandler would retake his man, and lodge him in jail and hold him for the traveling

circuit judge. The evidence would be the same; nothing would demolish the proof of Brazo's guilt. Too many witnesses had seen him fleeing from the bank, masked, and they had found some of the stolen money in his pockets. Van had planted it upon the boy's person. No—Brazo would be convicted. The court would be compelled to act upon the evidence regardless of how sentiment stood at the time of the trial.

Strothman had other things to think about, and he waited patiently three days, watching those headstrong twin imps of Satan move in and out of the bank, still seeking the gems, thinking perhaps they had been misplaced or that Old Cain had hidden them in some uncanny spot to keep them safe. They were handsomely, but negligently clad, always seeking masculine attention, always subtle. But Sheila and Jeff Spandler were at outs. They had not patched up their differences and both being hard-headed, they probably never would, and in this Van Strothman found pleasure, too. Sheila was paying now for the kickings and the bruisings she had inflicted upon the aged bones of their father's flunky. But she had a bigger price to pay yet, as did her sister, and the time was coming closer and closer.

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On the third evening he met the sisters at the bank, in their father's office, and said, "Who is going to run this institution? We must elect officers. We must have a president and a vice president. We must—"

Sheila turned her hot, dark face upon him. The sheen of her eyes, which were free of tumult now, matched the shine of the gems Strothman would use as bait for them, as meat for his tiger trap. "We'll run the bank," she said. "Just leave everything to us; I'll be president and Keila will act as vice president—"

"I'll do what?" Keila's pretty face was equally as dark and there was anger leaping flamelike into those cat-shaped orbs. "Since when did you decide to make me your subordinate?" she demanded furiously. "I'll head this institution, young lady, and you'll serve in the capacity you would have inflicted upon me."

They were mad enough to fight, and Strothman goaded them on. One word after another drew them closer to the limit of their endurance and then Sheila struck the first blow, slapping Keila across the face. They were at it then, moving like a couple of slim, graceful cats, tearing each other's clothes to pieces and wrestling and falling and stumbling and pulling each other's hair. Sheila forced Keila backward across a table and they rolled off of this onto the floor, kicking and biting and slugging. They were almost barren of clothing when Van Strothman, reluctantly of course, yanked Keila up off of the definitely conquered Sheila. He had always admired the former's infinitely superior strength.

He would have allowed them to murder each other save for the great desire that blistered him, and he did not want death to cheat him out of the thing he had worked and schemed for. He had waited too long; he had held his emotions in check too long.

He got them home and Sheila slammed the door in his face. He knew they wouldn't carry on the fight there because Mrs. Shane, Old Cain's housekeeper for five years, would keep them from continuing the feud. She was a smart woman; she understood them. But she didn't understand them as well as Van knew he did. He remembered their baby clothes and how he had changed them for school. Nobody would ever know as much as he knew about them; not in the way he knew it.

THE FOURTH morning after the rescue of the prisoner, Jim Brazo rode his mustang into town, hitched the horse at the pole in front

of the jail, and walking stolidly into the office, said to Jeff Spandler; "Well, Jeff, here I am. I'm tired of waiting for you to come and get me, so I came to you. All I want is a fair trial. I did not kill Clint Hurst. I went to the bank to see about a loan. I had been there several times. He asked me to come back, for several days he kept insisting that I come back and see him about the money; I guess I went back once too often."

"I reckon you surely must have," conceded the sheriff, feeling a wave of sympathy for the suspect and aware that his doubt of Brazo's guilt had been considerably augmented by Brazo's surrender. "I'll do all I can for you, Jim. It looks dark; the evidence is against you. But I'll give you all the support I can. There's only one thing, however, if you don't mind. Just how did you happen to get yourself into a position of that kind? I mean wearing the mask and having some of the stolen currency in your pockets?"

"I was knocked in the head." Jim Brazo smiled, and the weight of his voice denoted his agreement with Spandler that his situation was dark, indeed. "I entered the bank and crossed the front room. Just as I hit the door of Clint's office a thousand pounds of iron lit right on my head and everything went black. I don't know how long I was out but when I came to and found Clint dead, I got scared. I sensed a trap and ran out of the building and headed for my horse. The dust was blowing and there was a bunch of cowboys over in front of the *Alamo Saloon*. I saw Keila and Sheila Hurst running toward the bank. I figgered if I didn't remove the mask mebbe they wouldn't be able to tell who I was; my mustang is faster than most horses but those twin gals ran me down."

It all sounded straight enough to Spandler but he was only one man, and there would be a jury of twelve men that would have to be convinced. And it wasn't likely they'd heed Brazo's story. He got up out of his chair and took the .45 and cartridge belt that Jim Brazo held out to him in steady hands.

"This is going to be tough on my folks," Jim said softly. "My sisters will lose their school jobs on account of it and there's a good chance of me losing my neck. We'll see and trust in the highest power."

Without further comment Jeff Spandler locked the cell door on the suspect and walked away, his head down and his wide shoulders hunched under the burden that fate had cast upon his young shoulders. All this Van Strothman learned of through the whispering tongues of the troubled citizens and he felt more secure now, with Brazo behind lock and key. After all, the suspect was a farmer and the cattlemen of the county had it in for the sodbusters; Brazo wouldn't be able to win them over to his side. Even if he escaped with his neck they would give him a long prison sentence.

VAN STROTHMAN did not believe in the so called Higher Power of which Brazo had spoken with such confidence; in fact Van Strothman didn't believe in anything he couldn't see with his own eyes. He had his own ideas, his own convictions and nothing would ever budge him. He watched Jim Brazo's family unload in front of the jail and saw his crying mother and the bent form of his father and the two pretty schoolteachers who were the main support of the old folks now. But he secretly enjoyed the spectacle; he fingered his celluloid collar and watched.

Jim Brazo was held without bond. One hundred farmers rode into town and sought to arrange for his liberation from the steaming hot iron cell, but were unsuccessful because the county attorney said that in a case where the evidence was so strong, bond was not permissible for a sus-

pected murderer. The four saloons of the town were jammed that night with displeased farmers and unsympathetic cattlemen. Strothman made the rounds, slightly annoyed because he had heard some men say they did not believe Brazo guilty of the crime.

He was disturbed, too, by the rumor that Jeff Spandler was launching an extensive and intensive investigation into the murder of Old Cain. He had some respect for Spandler's brain; the fellow had shown himself upon numerous occasions to be anything but a fool. But what was there for him to find out? Van Strothman sneered; his tracks were too well covered.

He now began to work his scheme, and the twin daughters of the old man who had taught them that material wealth was worth more than spiritual well being had commenced to see daylight. Van first tackled Sheila. He said he had an idea and he wanted to see if it would work and would she ride out to the Old Hurst cabin with him in the morning? And if he should by any chance happen to find the gems would she be willing to do something for him—he did not tell her what it was he wanted out of her—if he would connive to recover the gems for her and her alone, so she could keep them and not have to wait for the estate to be probated and not have to divide them with Keila. She said she would do anything for him if he would get the gems for her.

He asked the same of Keila when he contrived to get her alone in the office. She was not reluctant to make him the same promise her sister had given him; she did not seem at all worried about the nature of his request nor did he explain it to her.

Consequently they rode out to the log cabin the next morning. Sheila and Van Strothman rode in a buckboard which she drove; Keila, unknown to Sheila, was to keep her appointment with Strothman the following afternoon.

They walked through knee-high weeds. Sheila wore a tan corduroy skirt and a thin, almost transparent silk shirt. It was unbearably hot. The fragrance of the prairie and the caroling of the birds were lost under the pressure of the killing flatiron heat.

Van Strothman pretended to search around the earthern floor of the kitchen. He found tracks of a man, which he pointed out to her, and he climbed up a wooden ladder nailed against the logs to the attic. This was a layer of planks that formed the kitchen ceiling and he had to crawl around in the dust on his hands and knees. He reappeared with a chuckle and in his hands were a rope of pearls and a palmed assortment of loose gems of rubies and emeralds and two or three large unset diamonds. When he held them out to Sheila she fairly lunged at him.

But he scurried out of her way. In his wide belt was a small whip and he stuffed the gems in his pocket and produced the lash. "You remember what you said you'd do," he croaked, his subtle brain working faster than it had ever worked before. "All right, be as good as your word, or you won't get these gems. I'll turn them over to the county attorney and they'll be divided between you and your sister, after you've waited a full twelve months for the estate to be probated. Make up your mind quickly, or I'll change my plans."

SHE FACED a concealed horror; she did not know the nature of it. But she knew one thing indubitably—he wouldn't kill her or he would have gone about this thing in a different manner. However, she paused no longer. Anything to cheat Keila. She would have all these gems for herself.

The grinning, evil-faced oddity of a man sighed deeply. He drew the short whip close against him. He spoke slowly, fingering his celluloid collar with his left hand, "Turn around."

She knew suddenly that what he sought was to see her suffer, that he was paying her back in full for all the things she had done to him.

Van Strothman made the whip sing as it cut through the air and into her flesh. She jumped away from the table and he ran her around in a circle, lashing at her fiendishly. But she did not utter a sound.

When he had completed the ordeal or the ritual, she ran out of the house and down across a small field. She dropped down beside a sibilant stream, rolled over on her back and submerged herself in the creek water. She lay there, shutting the sun out of her eyes, clenched her fists and compressed her full lips. The water soothed her.

Sheila reared up when she heard Van Strothman coming, stumbling toward her. Without a word he dropped the gems in the grass near her and then he went lurching away, a scarecrow of a man who walked like he was on stilts.

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The following afternoon Van Strothman, safe in the knowledge that Sheila had kept their secret, conducted the same ritual with Keila. She went through it with the same stoic indifference. She could take it; she stood the whipping with her black hair down over her shoulders, wincing and standing erect until he had exhausted himself as before. Then she smiled coldly at the appeased old man, and held out her long soft hand for the reward. He gave her the other half of the gems; he had, of course, withheld her portion, not letting either girl know that she wasn't getting all that belonged in the collection.

He was a different man when he drove her back to town; he had begun to admire her. His emotions were spent; he was weak and his failing body had been sapped of its strength, but with the experience had come the first peace he had known in twenty-one years. They had paid for their savage treatment of him; they weren't overbearing any more. For every time they had struck him and called him a foul name and kicked him, they had paid.

Jittery, unstable now, Van Strothman felt his whole nervous system collapse. He was walking up the steps of the bank when he heard Sheriff Jeff Spandler's voice outside. "Yes, it had to be the old man. Here's the proof. He always hated Clint Hurst. Clint's documents tell how he met Van Strothman who was wanted for murder and robbing a stagecoach. He shielded Strothman, got work out of him and had a faithful, obedient servant for more than twenty years. If Van had bothered to look into Clint's private papers he would have found the hemp noose that's waiting for his scrawny old neck. I'll—"

Van Strothman whirled and ran down the steps. He stumbled, pitched headlong into the dust, reeling off the edge of the high board walk. He rolled over and did not stop rolling in time to ward off the groping hands of the law or to resist with bullets from the gun he carried in his pocket. He was hauled to his feet and this time he knew the mob would not be turned back. Rushed straight to the courthouse cottonwood, the old man felt the noose settle around his neck. He spat twice into the leering face of Jess Steel who had been one of his best friends, and he kicked Spandler on the shins. He knew they were breaking his neck. But he stopped knowing anything, then; the rough, thready hemp crushed his celluloid collar.

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Another Fine Story
by Rex Whitechurch
WOMAN IN THE SKY
is in the December issue of
REAL WESTERN STORIES

He Flew the Last White Flag

True Fact Feature by BEN SMITH

IT WAS IN April, 1865, and the two men who met at the McClean House thought they were writing the last pages of the tragic story of the Civil War. On the ninth of April, when a weary General Lee met Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, and prepared to hand over his sword to the triumphant Union general, the last shot of the War had been fired. So, at least, they thought.

But the bloodshed went on. Two months after that fateful day in April, the last white flag was flown and the rattle of musketry was finally stilled.

On the 23rd of June, 1865, Brevet-General Stand Watie, a Cherokee Indian, surrendered at Doaksville, Choctaw Nation; it was then, and only then, that the Civil War was over.

Who was this phantom figure that led the Indian Territory troops into some of the most successful skirmishes of the War? And, why did he fight in a cause which apparently was not his own beyond the time when others had laid down their arms? For the answers to these questions it will be necessary to go back to the boyhood of this legendary leader of the Cherokee Mounted Rifles.

Born at Oo-yoo-ge-lo-gi, Georgia, in 1806 as Da-Gah-Daug, son of Oo-watie, this future Confederate General's life was entirely one of struggle.

Da-Gah-Daug meant, in Cherokee, "to stand together" or "stand firmly." Later in life, when the boy learned English, he contracted his name and his father's to obtain "Stand Watie."

Through the years of Watie's boyhood, tension was mounting between the whites and the Indians in Georgia. Depradations, by the whites, of Cherokee property, led the aboriginal Americans to retaliation. Finally the Government stepped in and "invited" those of the Indians who wished to sell their ancestral lands in Georgia.

Whether intentional or not, this action had the effect of splitting the Indian nation within itself, causing there to come into being two hostile camps, one of which numbered as leaders Stand Watie, his brother Elias Boudinot, Watie's uncle Major Ridge and John Ridge. These men, acting as chieftains of their people, signed the Indian Agreement, accepting land in what is now the eastern part of the State of Oklahoma as future dwelling places.

To certain men of the tribe, who felt that they had not been represented at the transaction, this was of the rankest treason. Under the leadership of John Ross, this faction opposed Watie on every matter carrying their feud to the new tribal home in Oklahoma Territory.

THE FIRST blow was struck at Stand Watie when his brother, Elias Boudinot, an important man in the tribe and editor of the first newspaper in the Cherokee language, was brutally clubbed and slashed to death, ostensibly by representatives of the Ross faction. From this moment, enmity between the two arms of the Indian Nation flamed into open conflict. One by one the entire panel

of signers of the original treaty with the Government died violently. Major Ridge, John Ridge and the rest of the twenty chieftains who had dealth with the so-called "hoodoo" treaty, were killed, leaving only Stand Watie.

A man of action, not words, Watie gathered an armed band about him and resisted the Ross-men. Bloody skirmish would follow bloody skirmish until the Government would step in, forcibly restoring peace. Watie, meantime, had been chosen many times to represent his people in their national council and he worked tirelessly throughout the years striving to heal the breach between the factions. Finally, in 1846, a treaty was signed and the fire that had burned so brilliantly throughout the stormy years flickered and almost went out. Almost...

In 1860-61 the peace of the United States and the Indian Nation was again broken; the Civil War gutted the manhood and the industry of the South just as thoroughly as did Sherman's marching torch spread devastation from Atlanta to the sea.

The Ross faction, with whom the treaty had been signed in 1846, went solidly in support of the Union; Watie sadly chose to cast his lot with the Confederacy. In 1862 Watie was elected Principal Chief of the Southern Branch of the Cherokee Nation. First a Captain, Watie was made a Colonel by General McCulloch of Texas and formed a regiment known as "The Cherokee Mounted Rifles."

WITH HIS half-wild band of Indians and half-breeds, Watie wrote one of the most thrilling chapters of the Civil War.

Stalking Union wagon trains and detached troops in the woods, this taciturn man moved with the stealth of his forebears, falling upon the hapless Unionists, capturing arms, animals, food, and money. At Cabin Creek, in Oklahoma, over 130 wagons, 740 mules and property to the extent of $1,500,000 fell into the hands of Watie's Mounted Rifles. At Pea Ridge, one of the major Civil War battles of the West, it is reported that this stocky Cherokee's followers resorted to the use of bows and arrows, the only time officially in the War.

Watie and his troops fought at Neosho, Honey Springs, Fort Gibson, Bird Creek and other places both in the Territory and without, Watie personally leading all charges. It is almost miraculous that this man, considering the ferocity with which it is reported that he went into battle, suffered no wounds.

Jefferson Davis, recognizing the ability and worth of this native North American, appointed Stand Watie Brigadier-General on May 10th, 1864. Watie was thus the second Indian to attain this rank, being later brevetted. Following this, all Indian Territory troops were placed under his personal direction.

Following his surrender at Doaksville, in June, Stand Watie returned to private life, but his days continued to be filled with sorrow.

His three sons quickly followed each other in death and the remaining six years of Watie's life found him broken both in fortunes and health.

The questions of this day, asked of this aboriginal American, must, in the main, remain unanswered. Why did he fight as he did for a nation not his own split by the greatest of civil strife? Was it simply the antagonism toward Ross that Watie bore extended into the struggle between the North and the South? Or, did Watie feel more deeply of the principles involved? It is evident that he thought first of the welfare of his people, the Indian Nation as a whole, and the fate of his own kind was knit as an integral into the pattern of the whole.

Still, he bore arms for his beliefs, fighting on when the men who had commanded him had laid down their

own battered arms at Appomattox. That he fought on the losing side in no way detracts from the value of his fighting.

The Nation Watie loved, the Indian Nation, is dying, or dead. The Civil War is past these many years, although not entirely forgotten. And, Watie need never fear; his influence upon his people is still felt; with his hands he molded the course of the years to come.

Stand Watie died at Honey Creek, his old home, on September 9, 1871.

At Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the seat of government for the Indian Nation, where Watie served as Councilman for the Cherokees, there is a monument erected, a lasting tribute to a man who was a great man to his people.

For whatever reason Stand Watie, colorful leader of the Cherokee Mounted Rifles, fought on, it cannot diminish one iota the grandeur and valor of the struggle itself, nor can it detract in the least from the valiant history of a courageous man.

Wherever fighting men meet and talk of the deeds of past heroes who have gone on to that Valhalla where swords are forever sheathed, they can only say a simple thing of Stand Watie, yet in its simplicity lies the very eloquence of the tribute:

He flew the last white flag....

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THE OUTLAW WHO HAD FRIENDS

[Continued From Page 45]

both the state courts and the federal district courts. But both of the courts ran into complications...namely witnesses and public opinion.

The witnesses brought in by the courts proved useless. Something went wrong in every case that was tried; either the witnesses were afraid of Frank; or they couldn't remember exactly what the robbers looked like because of the time that had elapsed; or else it would turn out that Frank had not been in on that particular robbery. Not one witness could, or would, identify Frank as one of the Jesse James gang.

On the other hand, Frank had two groups of friends who clammored quickly to his rescue as witnesses for the defense. One group was the people whom he and Jesse had helped financially in return for food, shelter, and hiding while they were on the run. The other group consisted of Frank's neighbors who had known him only as a common, ordinary farmer like themselves—a man who always had a kind word and a helping hand for anybody who needed it.

Organized by Frank's smart lawyers, these two groups of witnesses gave individual testimonies that denied the possibility of Frank's being on hand during the time any of the robberies had occurred.

To add to the outlaw's favor, the juries of all the trials were sympathetic with him because they thought him to be a victim of circumstances. This, plus the state and federal court's lack of evidence, and the convincing stories by the witnesses for the defense proved far too much for the government prosecutors and their cases fell to shambles. So there was nothing left to do but turn Frank James loose again; it was a simple case of society being for an outlaw instead of against him.

Society had done Frank a favor, and he repaid them by not letting them down. After his acquittal on all charges, Frank used the rest of his $10,000 reward money to buy a farm for himself near Fletcher, Oklahoma. Here, he lived the life of a peacable, respected farmer until he died of old age...and with his boots off.

Digger John's MULTIPLE TROUBLE

Digger sprawled helplessly in the dirt of the corrall...

By A. A. BAKER

Gold Run thought it had seen everything, but a new thrill came that day they heard Dredger Dan yell out, "He's gone crazy... Off'n his rocker..." —and dashed out to find Dredger Dan hog-tying Digger John!

THE MINING town of Gold Run huddled in the immediate shadow of Cold Spring Mountain and the late morning sun clawed its way over the Sierra's peaks. A dog fight scattered the dusty gravel on Main Street, but yawning citizens paid little heed. Morning fires were smoking from the teamsters' lot. A swamper from *Black's Emporium* was washing out a pickle barrel in the churning creek and nodding to the

miners as they trudged toward the hydraulic mines to relieve the night shift.

Half way down the street the ashy manzanita smoke seeped from Digger John's adobe. Shadows were suddenly melted away as the sun topped the peaks and shifted through the narrow windows and warmed Digger's kitchen.

With the sun came trouble—trouble that would lead the rough pioneer down a predestined path until his name would work its way a peg below that of California's lowest desperado.

Hog fat in the frying pan spit from beneath the eggs and, instead of splashing harmlessly on the hot stove, hit Digger John in the eye. The straight-edged razor that Digger was wielding, one he had owned for twenty years and had used approximately ten times, cut a gash in his ear when the fat grease spit.

Gently, the miner laid down the razor, pushed the frying pan back on the stove, and reached for a towel to stop the bleeding. The towel end flicked and hit the handle of the pan and as the big man stared in something like awe, the pan tipped lazily and the hot grease cascaded down his trouser leg and into his boot. It seared a scalding path deep into his flesh. Bellowing with pain, he staggered out into the yard and jammed his leg into his water trough.

A jenny burro snorted and withdrew its black nose from the trough, gazed with startled irritation at the cursing miner, then moved disgustedly away from the trough and nibbled at the grass outside the corral bars. A rattlesnake, suddenly disturbed, paused, then sank its fangs deep into the velvet nose of Jenny. The animal bleated in pain and turned pleadingly toward Digger. The snake coiled and clacked a frantic warning as the miner approached with a raised pitchfork. He made a spearing dive for the snake and jabbed. The end tine of the pitchfork struck a rock, deflected, and speared through the leather of Digger's boot; as Digger jumped around in pain, the snake slithered away.

Recklessly, the big man charged for the house and came out with his shotgun. He almost made it back to the corral when the congealed grease, oozing about inside his boot, caused him to skid. He came down astraddle the lower bar of the fence and both barrels of the gun tripped and the blasting roar started the Jenny bucking frantically. The pellets from the shells bounced from the oak rails and peppered Digger's stomach like stinging hornets.

Digger, exhausted, red mud plastered on his half-shaved face and cut ear, blood oozing from his stabbed foot, smoke still rising from the barrels of his gun, lay over the rail and howled in frustration.

SEVERAL of the teamsters hurried over from the horse lot behind Digger's adobe and extracted the limp, bleating man. Gold Run's citizens hurried toward the ruckus. There hadn't been any excitement for several months. They knew that when Digger John tore loose they had best be present; he had been raising a general hades of one kind or another for years. If a gold strike was made, he was in the thick of it and usually ended up with the biggest share. If a drinking bout was on, he lasted longest. A fight ended only when his opponents were hung on the rafters. Gold Run had seen many characters in its short life. There had been dudes and plug-hatted gamblers; the dudes usually died in some wild canyon and the gamblers were buried with the plugged hats on their chests to cover the bullet holes.

Soldiers from Stevenson's Regiment. Chileans from South America, stole and murdered their way, leaving their blood on the cobbled streets with empty shotgun shells. Missourians, long rifles smoking, fought among

themselves on the horse lot. Texas pioneers pried spent lead from the walls of the saloons with glittering Bowies. Hounds from San Francisco strong-armed their deadly way into the back alleys and hung gracefully when caught by the Miner's Court. Mexicans' and Californians' blood heated in the crucible of deceit and hate for the 'foreigners' who usurped their land grants, rode steaming horses and butchered unfortunate travelers.

The mountains of the Sierras hemmed in the town as though offering protection from the frontier fury generated by the Gold Rush, but Gold Run was beyond protection from the actions of its citizens. This the townspeople knew, and when a ruckus started, they knew their best chance for survival lay in knowing just what was going on so they could protect themselves. They also knew that when the hulking Digger John errupted, all other dangers were minor. Whenever *he* tipped the barrel, hell rose right out of the ground.

Dredger Dan, hotel owner and saloon keeper of Gold Run's largest establishment, arrived late. He gazed in disbelief as he watched the ranting Digger. Knife in hand, John was wrestling a plunging burro. He had nicked the nose of the animal and was trying to force shotgun shells into Jenny's nostrils. Dredger took one amazed look, then went into action. He snatched a rope from the harness peg and entered the fray. Digger saw the saloon man charge through the crowd and shouted. "Tie her legs! She's gettin' away..." The blood from his cut ear ran over his face and striped the mud.

"Oh, sure..." Dredger said coolly, then threw the rope over Digger's massive shoulders and hastily slipped it down around his elbows. Then, with a grunting heave he dug in his heels and drew the rope taut. Digger promptly lost his balance and sprawled helplessly in the dirt of the corral. His knife was lost in the melee and the Jenny kicked through the fence and took off for Cold Spring Mountain, trying to outrun the pain of the snake bite.

Dredger jumped astride the roped man and shouted. "I got him! *Get in here!*" he roared at the silently awed crowd. "Help me. Help me tie him up. He's gone crazy... Off'n his rocker..."

The crowd started edging backward. The ruckus had started too fast. They weren't sure whether Digger had gone crazy and tried to stab the Jenny or what. They *did* know that Dredger was in for a whirl when he had thrown the rope onto the wild-eyed miner and weren't sure if his suddenly wild threshing could be controlled by the rope or anything else available. Dredger was left alone. Left on the weather deck of a hurricane as Digger started to free himself.

SLOWLY, but majestically, Digger crawled to the corner post of the corral and edged his tormentor against the crossbars. As his fat back crushed into the bars, Dredger screamed in anguish. "Let me loose ...'fore yew break my back...let me..."

"I'll let yew loose..." panted Digger..."when I hear yore backbone break. I'll let yew loose...when I squeeze yore ribs out through the top of yore ornery head." He gave another push and, when Dredger let out a yell that echoed out over the mountains, he relaxed his hold.

As Digger untangled himself from the rope, through his plaintive cursing words when he noticed the burro had broken loose, things were cleared up for the crowd.

"Thet pore danged burro got bit by a rattler. I was tryin' to get her noseholes plugged open with them cut-off shotgun cartridges so's she could breathe. Once that rattler poison swells her nose closed... Now..."

John stared at the transfixed hotel man. "Now, cause of this addled fool, with his brains curdled by the sour milk of meanness...thet pore Jenny is runnin' wild over Cold Spring Mountain. She'll die if'n I don't run her down." With cold dignity, he stepped through the door of his adobe and snatched up his rifle and hat then took off into the brush.

•

The mountains of the Sierra range were rugged. The soft colors of the pine and black oak hid the gnarled, sticky underbrush of manzanita and buckbrush. Trails of miners wound about like the path of a demented snake but Digger's burro had not followed a beaten path so the merciful mission of the miner was plagued by his efforts to thresh through the brush. Hours passed, and he rested atop Cold Spring Mountain and surveyed the area. His clothes were tattered by the pocket-picking branches of the sturdy manzanita and his temper was frayed. As he sat, the dusk came down and pulled the shades of night slowly over the land. The mountains hunched under their blankets and turned their backs on the weary man and his fruitless search for his dying burro.

The banditos found Digger's Jenny. The forlorn animal, nose deeply lacerated by Digger's knife and the rattler's fangs, bruised and skinned from its frantic flight, wandered into their camp at the base of Cold Spring Mountain.

Pancho Ruiz coldly eyed the suffering animal. He kicked the manzanita fire together and stared through yellowed eyes that reflected the inner bitterness of his outcast race. Ruiz and his two partners had torn down their welcome in California. They lay concealed in the cold canyon like bobcats trapped in a cave. For weeks they had starved. What little sustenance they had had was crushed red berries from the manzanita, a few rabbits, and a too trusting procupine. Their saddlebags were crammed with gold, still stained with the blood of its rightful owners. By now, the three men would have given all their loot for a full meal, when Digger's tortured Jenny staggered in.

"Muy Bonita..." Pancho whispered hungrily. He shifted his position and rose slowly to his feet. The webs of his hauraches creaked and his partners came awake and stared at their leader. They saw him release his knife from its sheath. Fearfully they lay, and silently gathered their muscles as Pancho stared wildly past his seemingly sleeping companions. He moved quickly, and Carlos, with a wild yell, got to his feet and struck out with his own knife. Pancho drew back in alarm and turned to the attack. He was pounced on by a screaming Hernandez and the burro clattered off to a safe distance to watch the fight.

"Carlos...Hernandez...no!" Pancho bellowed and tried to ward off the knives of his companions. "It's the burritto ... not you I was ..."

Carlos drew back as Hernandez charged. He threw Pancho to the ground and then Carlos saw Jenny. Swiftly, he acted. While the two fighters rolled among the moss carpeted stones, Carlos snatched a pine stick and laid open Hernandez' skull. The man collapsed, and Pancho lay panting until Carlos silently raised him to his feet.

They both stared hungrily at the burro then settled down silently by the fire and waited for it to regain its courage and approach. Hernandez lay in the dirt and his breath rattled and wheezed in his throat.

HIGH OVERHEAD, Digger John shifted his weight and tried to trace the direction from which originated the startled shouts of Pancho.

He gathered his gun and began the tortuous descent through the dark.

Carlos and Pancho heard his approach and stared toward the mouth of the canyon. Uneasily, they wondered who could be out in the night. Could it be a scout? Leading a band of avenging hunters? The bandit's hopes were primitive. One, that whoever was coming would have something to eat—or two, that they could kill him before he scared off the succulent burro.

Hernandez moaned and rolled over just as Digger saw his Jenny. He halted and listened, then was thrown violently to his knees as the two men flung themselves on the bewildered miner. He fought until the knives of his attackers dripped with his blood. His heavy deer-hide shirt turned back some of the fury of the sharp blades, but the banditos bored in and he was finally smashed to the ground. He lay quietly under the threat of a knife that nicked his pulsing throat vein.

Pancho sat back on his heels and grunted disgustedly. "Madre Dios, what a night is this..."

Digger's voice crackled in fury. "I'm jest tryin' to find a burro; 'stead of that, I run into a couple of wild-eyed, knife fightin' galoots."

"Ah, yes..." hissed Pancho..."the burritto. We also are needing the animal. Burritto steak, ah." He wiped a dirty hand across his lips. Carlos stared hungrily, waiting for the order to sink his knife deep into Digger's throat, but Pancho shook his head.

"Eat Jenny!" Digger roared and felt the knife sting. He relaxed and snorted. "She's snake-bit; eat her an' you'll die of poison." The banditos looked startled and Carlos straightened up and tried to edge toward the animal for a closer look.

"Struck her right on the nose..." Digger hurriedly pressed his point. "Thet's the reason we're both out in the danged mountains at night." He motioned toward the groaning Hernandez. "S'matter with yore partner? He wasn't in on the fight."

Pancho moved toward the dimly-seen mound of equipment and returned with a leather braided rope. Soon Digger was trussed.

Hernandez was dragged over to the fire and he was soon cursing softly as he listened to the instructions of his leader. "We will use the Americano. He can advance on the miners' cabins, without fear of attack; the miners have food. We will wait, and when the men are talking, we can rush in with pistols and take the food. Maybe...maybe even more gold, eh? Then we'll take the south direction to Mexico. The gold will be heavy but the burritto can carry it...onless he is too sick...then we shoot it..." He stole a glance at Digger and grinned widely at his protesting roar.

"Thet Jenny's jest like my...well, she's like a human." Digger's voice was pleading. "If I can work on her some, I'll be able to fix it so's thet rattlesnake poison won't kill her. I'll need some black powder so's I can burn out the bite 'fore it infects."

●

THE THREE banditos, Hernandez still wobbly from his cut head, their three horses, Digger and his snake-struck burro, hit the American River the next day.

The river prospectors, hip deep in the icy water, sun streaming the sweat from their aching shoulders, would straighten at a hail from the brush, then Digger and his burro would trudge into view. The tired, news-hungry miners would straighten up from their awkward crouch, lay aside their tools, and wade the shallow water from the sandbars for a chat with the big, popular pioneer.

The burro's head was swollen to the size of a powder keg and much amazed advice was passed on as prop-

er cures. Hot irons to burn out the infection. Poultices of everything from onions to amalgam; all had been tried by one or another of the trusting prospectors. Whiskey was the surest cure, and the burro drank so much of the stuff that Digger moaned.

"I can't tell if it's the snake poison that's makin' her head swell, or if'n the pore thing's jest got a head-swellin' hangover. Anyways, if thet whiskey ain't doin' her any good, it's at least savin' a lot of good men from overdrinkin'. She's swilled it out'a everythin' from gold pans to stew pots an' she's still on her feet."

Digger's joviality held a forced note as he knew the banditos were watching from the brush with their guns trained on his friends. A false move, and they would come charging out and, before the miners could do more than stare, Pancho and his partners would empty the camp of food and gold. They would drive Digger and his burro on down the river where the robbery would be repeated.

Fortunately, when they did appear, the miners recognized the deadly desire for food on the banditos' part and that they would kill if necessary. The miners gave freely of their food and gold.

The word of Digger's banditos penetrated through the river country and Pancho soon realized that Digger's value as a decoy had disappeared. It was just one week after Digger had followed his ailing burro into Pancho's camp that he realized the banditos were now supplied for their dash to the border. He had no doubts of their willingness to erase him from the living; knowing of his need to fight for his life, Digger prepared himself.

They were camped in a towering mass of boulders some halfmile back from the river. The windy swish of the water could be heard as the night deepened. The campfire burned fitfully and cast rosy shadows against the gray granite. The banditos clustered near the fire and threw questioning glances toward their prisoner. He was hobbled about the feet and a long Mexican rope was securely tightened about his neck. Nearby, the burro stamped fitful feet and swung its tortured swollen muzzle. Its ears drooped and its knees wobbled as it stirred about. The horses of the banditos swished their ragged tails and moved fretfully as the miner tried to catch the muttered talk of his captors.

"Is enough of food?" Pancho questioned.

"Si, Pancho..." grunted Carlos... "we 'ave the food and the gold. When we reach Mexico we..."

"You think only of your stomach," growled the leader. "When we reach Mexico it is time for thinking. Now, we must make ready for the long march and the Gringo is no longer needed. Hernandez, you fix the Gringo. Use the knife; we are close to the river and a gun would be heard. Pronto!"

Digger rose to his hobbled feet and bellowed. "Hernandez! Better bring yore friends with yew; yew'll need

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someone to hold me if yore gonna use a knife." The burro heard his angry shout and staggered to his master. Digger threw an affectionate hand over the animal's neck and muttered. "We done their dirty business. Had to help them rob our friends...now, it's time to help ourselves."

The burro raised its head and gazed into the sky for a few seconds and sneezed violently. Digger frowned and stared at his Jenny but before he could move, the banditos approached.

Pancho Ruiz led the group and snapped. "You think, Gringo, that we leave you here alive?" Then he laughed. "Hernandez is to cut you. He is ver' good with the knife. You shall see his skill. Hernandez! Show the Gringo what you learn."

DIGGER moved out to the length of his halter and the Jenny patiently followed, then gave another tremendous sneeze. Hernandez moved in, his knife held level with his hip, cutting edge up, and the moon caught and toyed with the polished edge. Digger waited. His muscles swelled inside his shirt and the sweat of fury soaked his armpits. The hair rope tightened and his bound feet gave him little freedom. Digger had no fear of a cutting knife fighter. The slash of a knife left scars but seldom reached a vital organ. Hernandez might wound him but....

His thoughts scrambled as Hernandez slashed, and the blade ripped through the muscles of the miner's forearm. One long upward thrust was all the bandito got in before the rock strewn gully became a bloody death trap for the three. Digger had taken the slash just as the Jenny again sneezed. This sneeze violently blew out the shotgun wad that Digger had jammed in its nose days before, when the rattler hit. The wad hit Hernandez full in the face and Digger claimed his victim. The knife had reached its arc and came down in Digger's hand. The edge slit the rope around his ankles and, in its still arcing sweep, sawed through the hair rope binding his neck. He charged, and met the knives of Pancho and Carlos.

The giant miner had fought for his life before. He had run the gauntlet of death so many times that odds of three-to-one seemed fair to the man. He lifted Hernandez' struggling, bleeding body and jammed him into his partners. He caught Carlos around the neck with a hairy arm and cut through the shoulder muscles of the struggling man.

Pancho Ruiz recognized death approaching and danced nimbly about in a frantic attempt to prolong his life. He pulled his gun and fired. The shot spewed against a boulder and Digger came on in a gravel-flailing rush. Pancho fired again, and Digger took it in his shoulder, but not before he reached the gunman. Pancho felt the knife grind deep and died in the sandy gravel of the gully.

●

A day later, Digger led his captured horses into lower Gold Run. Hernandez, the lone bandit survivor, walked ahead of the battered miner. Carlos and Pancho dangled stiffly over the back of the plodding horses. The burro trotted aimlessly beside the group, carrying a mighty load of leather bags filled with the raiders' loot.

Digger John's stolid approach brought the curious citizens out of their homes and saloons. They gathered on the boardwalks until he rode by, then followed in his wake to *Dredger's Hotel and Saloon.* It was quiet, and many were puzzled, for it seemed a mighty unusual event for a man to ride in to his own hanging. But then, they reasoned, Digger was an unusual man.

He pulled up in front of the saloon

and sat his horse quietly until the citizens crowded close. Then he spoke. "This is Hernandez," he directed their attention to the weary bandito. "He's my prisoner an' I saved his hide so he could explain what's been goin' on. Yew've all been hearin' stories 'bout me robbin' the river miners. Well, Hernandez is goin' to explain. Speak up!"

"It is true..." the bandito said wearily... "I will explain. The dead ones..." he thrust a hand toward his late partners... "and, I, Hernandez, have use this one." Again an eloquent gesture toward Digger John. "We were in need of food and captured him. He...we did use him until he cut us down with knife."

"Thet clear?" Digger's probing eyes speared the crowd. "They been usin' Jenny an' me as decoys. We been helpin' them rob the river miners...but they ain't robbin' any more. The gold they stole is in them bags on Jenny's back an'll be returned to them what has a claim.

"First, howsomever..." Digger's eyes crinkled..."we're gonna use just a mite of thet gold to buy ever'body a drink. Jenny's the only one's been gettin' whiskey. Funny thing about thet. The whiskey must'a beat the snake poison right out'a her 'cause when thet shotgun shell come loose from her nose, her head stopped swellin'. Now. Someone take this bandito over to the hangin' tree whilst we all have a long snort of redeye."

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

PROBABLY few people would think of calling Billy-the-Kid a juvenile delinquent. Yet he killed his first man at the edge of twelve and became notorious while still in his teens. That teen-age crime did not originate with the movies and gangster films is also born out by other incidents from the annals of the West. For example, there was the case of the Junior Wild Bunch.

The element which seems to be common to most juvenile crime is the existence of a criminal "hero" after whom behavior is patterned. In the days of the West, there was no need for movie or fictional gangsters to fill this role; there were too many real-life desperadoes to catch the imagination of impressionable youngsters.

In this case, the "heroes" were Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch of Hole-in-the-Wall fame. The Wild Bunch were acknowledged to be the most daring and best organized outlaw gang that had ever terrorized a territory, not excluding the James or Younger gangs. Rustling was their steady occupation and audacious bank robberies, payroll holdups, and train robberies were their avocation. In their free time they shot up the towns around their roost just for fun. So powerful was the Wild Bunch that even the law in Johnson County, Wyoming, where they operated, seldom dared to oppose them. On the few occasions when a member of the Bunch landed in jail, he was usually released because he could not be convicted. The Wild Bunch as good as owned the county.

At one time, however, three of the Wild Bunch riders got into a shooting scrape over in Utah, and killed two prospectors. They were arrested and put in jail in the town of Vernal. Butch Cassidy, visiting the men, found they had no funds to hire lawyers. Thereupon, Cassidy promptly robbed

★ **By Ed K. Barnett** ★

a bank in Montpelier, Idaho, and used the money to hire the best lawyers.

Feeling began to rise against the outlaws in the town, however, and it looked as though the killers would be convicted. Noting this, Cassidy and the Wild Bunch announced their intention, as it was described in the town newspaper, of bursting into the courtroom, shooting down the sheriff, the deputies and anyone else who stood in their way, and carrying the prisoners off with them.

This threat received wide publicity, and would undoubtedly have been carried out, except that the jailed men begged Cassidy to hold off. They had become friends with some of the lawmen, and felt they would rather go to prison for a couple of years than see any of them killed; Cassidy went back to Wyoming, to be greeted as a returning hero.

THESE RATHER spectacular activities were just the kind of thing to set immature imaginations on fire. Four Brown's Hole, Wyoming, teenagers, named George Harris, George Bains, Joe Rolls, and Young Shirley, decided to band themselves together in imitation of Cassidy and his men, and they took upon themselves the name of the Junior Wild Bunch.

Following Cassidy's methods in so far as they knew how, the four youngsters got out a map of the country, and decided on the bank in the town of Meeker, Colorado, about seventy-

On the morning of October 13, 1896, the Junior Wild Bunch rode over to Meeker. Still following the approved Cassidy procedure, they left Joe Rolls outside the town, with extra horses to speed their getaway after their first mounts tired from the sprint out of town.

Unhappily, the three who went in to rob the bank never got as far as the getaway. They lined up the bank employees against the wall, but before they could sweep the money into sacks, one of the three got an itchy finger and shot off his sixgun. If they had been wise, they would have cleared out at once. However, they delayed long enough to find and pick up the money that was lying around.

When they went out the door, they ran square into a mob of armed men who were descending on the bank, having been attracted by the sound of the shot.

There was a short, wild gun-battle. Within seconds, two of the Junior members were lying dead on the ground, and the other was dying. Joe Rolls, the one who had been holding the relay horses, after an abnormally long wait, guessed what had happened, and got out of there, heading back to Brown's Hole. He went to Cassidy with his story, and Cassidy threatened to take vengeance against the Meeker citizens, but did nothing.

The career of the Junior Wild Bunch had come to a quick and abrupt termination.

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Bloodhound on the Trail

By C. H. Cogswell

Bert Nivens figured that Wild Bill Herrick wanted him as deputy for just one reason — and that reason had little to do with upholding law and order here.

THE PRICE of beef went down and on top of that there came one of the worst northers they had seen in years. Cattle piled up along the drift fences and froze to death; they found them dead or starving in coulees and along the creek bottoms. The only ones they saved were the ones they pastured near the home ranch and were able to feed. Come

spring, Old Man Barber of the Circle B was discouraged and ready to call it quits. He sold out, lock, stock and barrel, and instead of being foreman of one of the nicest spreads in west Texas, Bert Nivens was a cowpoke without a job. He didn't want to go back to earning his beans and sowbelly punching cows for forty and found again—a doubtful forty and found at that, considering the price of beef—so when Wild Bill Herrick approached him about being his deputy, Bert gave him a listening ear.

"But yuh ain't been elected Sheriff yet, Bill," he argued half heartedly. "And as actin' Sheriff of Coyote County and Coyote Springs yuh ain't stood too steady. I'm not so sure I want t'be yore runnin' mate. Shootin' first and askin' questions afterwards ain't what people want in a Sheriff. Yuh're too trigger happy, Bill—yuh've got t'tone down a bit and tend to business. Yuh spend too much time in the *Three Deuces.*"

"Listen, Bert," Wild Bill defended himself. "This Sheriff's job ain't no position for a creampuff. And when it comes to shootin' or arguin', it ain't goin' t'do you no good ten thousand feet deep in Hell. Look at the record—take Wild Bill Hickock. He was fast but he started his draw fast, too! Yuh got t'know the criminal mind, Bert, and outguess the other feller."

"And what makes yuh think I'd make a good deputy?" Bert persisted, his brown eyes worried in his serious open face. "I ain't had no experience with the criminal type; besides if I get mixed up in politics I'll lose a lot of friends and what will I gain if yuh lose out? Nothin'. When yuh get elected look me up; if I ain't got another Foreman's job by then, I'll consider the job."

"Everyone knows," Wild Bill had a sly gleam in his sharp blue eyes, "everyone knows yuh're a man t'ride the river with. At the rodeos yuh always place in the money in almost every event and no one will match yuh with a shootin' iron. I ain't kiddin' myself, Old Son; yuh stand pretty high in the saddle around these parts and yuh've got a rep for ridin' a straight trail. That's the kind of gent I need t'side me come election."

"But times are hard now, Bill," Bert tried to evade the issue a little longer. "A lot of good riders have turned renegade and the renegades gotta work a lot harder at their trade. Even the Indians are on the warpath. What can they expect to accomplish with a handul of cavalry?"

"I wouldn't have thought it, Bert," Wild Bill followed up his advantage. "Yuh wouldn't want it said Bert Nivens was afraid to take the job?"

"Now, Bill, yuh know it ain't that—"

"Then yuh'll do it?" Wild Bill's stringy mustache twitched with satisfaction. "I knew I could count on you. With you as my deputy it's a cinch. I'll be Sheriff of Coyote County! We'll run every renegade out of Coyote Springs; we'll show folks what law and order really means. Yuh've done a lot of folks a lot of favors as Foreman of the Circle B; that will be a big thing in our success, Old Son. Just be careful that when yuh get t'be my deputy yuh don't get soft-hearted and turn the prisoners loose. Yuh never could say 'no' when someone asked yuh for help. That can be a weakness, Bert, as well as a virtue."

●

SOMETIMES Bert got the mail, sometimes the Sheriff got it. When Bert got it and opened it, he always confided the details in his chief; but Wild Bill was not so open and above board with his deputy. Bert brooded about it as he slouched in a chair against the wall with his boots on top of the Sheriff's desk. Sometimes he would get up and stride about the office, his muscular body tensing and his broad shoulders squirming against this inactivity. At other times he would relax in his chair and actually go off

to sleep. "This is a hell of a job," he muttered to himself. "At this rate I won't be good for nothin' again. I'll be so lazy I won't want to work."

Finally, his resentment getting the better of him, he almost resigned. "We're gettin' a lot of criticism, Bill," he said one afternoon when the Sheriff came in and threw down several letters on the desk. "The country is crawlin' with cattle-thieves, horse-thieves, highway robbers, bank bandits, deserters from the army and what not. I meant it when I said I'd give them law and order—let's do somethin', Bill. I'm gettin' fat and sluggish."

"Now you just hold yore horses, Old Son," Wild Bill responded with bleary eyes. "I'm the Sheriff of Coyote County and I've been in this law game a lot longer than you have. The salary they're payin' us is lousy compared to the talent they're gettin'."

"For the work we do," Bert flared, "it's the highest wages ever paid to a man in this country. I tell yuh, Bill, loafin' around the *Three Deuces* day and night like yuh are ain't doin' your job."

"Listen, Bert," Wild Bill bristled in front of his deputy. "I know what I'm doin'. There's a lot more to this law business than meets the eye. We can go out there in the rocks and cactus and wear ourselves down to skin and bones and what will it get us? Maybe we pick up a couple of waddies who need a few steaks t'keep from starvin'. Maybe we pick up a couple of nesters skinnin' out a beef t'take home to their wife and kids who are hungry. What does that get us with beef dirt cheap? I just ain't got the heart for that sort of thing, Bert, and you ain't either. There's no glory and no money in it."

"The law is the law, Bill," Bert persisted; "we swore to uphold it."

"That's the trouble with you, Bert," Wild Bill complained. "Yuh take these things for their face value; but no man ever did that, Bert. Yuh've got t'use a little judgment, know how to balance one thing against the other; but mainly, we got t'figger where we come out. Now just suppose, Bert, that a real outlaw should blow into Coyote Springs—someone with a price on his head. We could lock him up and collect a nice reward. How would, say, five hundred dollars strike yuh as a sort of bonus?"

"It would make me feel like a snake," Bert responded with vehemence. "It would be almost like takin' a bribe. I don't want an extra reward for doin' somethin' I'm already bein' paid for. Why, Bill, this county is gettin' so lousy the way yuh're runnin' this Sheriff's office that it's turnin' into a sort of a refuge for all the low characters in the country. It makes me blush all over just thinkin' of it!"

Wild Bill thrust out his jaw angrily. "If yuh ain't satisfied with yore job I'll take yore resignation any time yuh like. I took yuh in when yuh was broke and out of a job and gave yuh a chance t'be somethin' besides a saddle tramp lookin' for a place t'flop yore tarp."

"It would be an honor t'talk to a cow compared t'you," Bert's hand dropped to his hip threateningly. "Yuh know why yuh wanted me for yore deputy—yuh needed the influence of my friends t'get in, and now that yuh got in I can go t'hell! Well, if yuh want my resignation yuh can have it. I'm tired of sittin' here on my fanny doin' nothin'. Come spring, Ol' Man Barber will probably be wantin' t'buy back his Circle B spread and I'll take back my old job, and when I quit I'll tell my friends why!"

WILD BILL HERRICK was no fool. His anger subsided as suddenly as it had flared up and the light in Bert's eyes must have warned him of his danger. "Now wait a minute, Old Son," he raised a restraining hand. "This ain't no way for us t'get along. I need yuh fur my deputy just as much as yuh need the deputy's job. When the time is right and yuh can go back to roddin' some nice outfit, I'll accept

yore resignation gladly. Fur now, let's try t'get along. Try t'look at it my way. I been holdin' back fur a good reason. I'm lettin' the small fry have their fun with the hopes that some big fish will come into my pond. Didja ever hear of the Oklahoma Kid?"

"Most everyone has," Bert admitted, his anger subsiding slightly. "But I don't see what the Oklahoma Kid has to do with us. He's operatin' a long way from here."

"News gets around fast among hoss thieves and such," Wild Bill observed shrewdly as he rolled and lit a cigarette. "Now it's probably got around by now that Coyote County is a good place t'hole up. It's probably known by now that I spend my time loafin' instead of pursuin' my lawful duties. Probably they think I'm scared. Yuh know me better than that, Bert; I ain't scared, I'm layin' a trap for the Oklahoma Kid, and by crakety I'll get him or someone else with a price on his head. I could use the money; but the money won't be a drop in the bucket compared to the fame we'll get. Think what it will mean to our reputations if we bring in a real tough gunman!"

"Yeah," Bett responded sarcastically, "hot air is cheap. I can just see yuh bringin' in a gunslinger like the Oklahoma Kid. Why I'll bet yuh don't even know what he looks like."

"Yore right, Bert," Wild Bill admitted. "I don't know what he looks like but I know a few things about him. He's a smooth operator and he has plenty of money. When a man has plenty of money where does he head for? Why someplace t'spend it of course. Well, some folks go huntin' deer and antelope by tryin' t'chase 'em down. A smart Indian will wait at the water hole and save himself a lot of sweat. I'm goin' t'be a smart Indian, Bert. I'll wait at the water hole and save a lot of good hoss flesh and a lot of wear and tear on the seat of my pants."

"One way or the other you're bound to wear out the seat of yore pants," Bert drawled as a grim thought struck him. "Yore idea might work out fine if yuh was huntin' antelopes; but yuh ain't huntin' antelopes, *Old Son*. This time yuh're huntin' lions and sometimes they wait at the water hole, too!"

●

IT WAS A sweltering hot afternoon and Bert, reclining in his chair propped against the wall, had just dozed off, his hat over his face to keep off the flies. When he awoke he had the vague impression he was dreaming. He rubbed his eyes in unbelief and his mouth fell open. "Whwwh-ats that?"

Wild Bill grinned broadly at his deputy's amazement at the huge beast at his side. "It's a bloodhound; I just bought him from a company of soljers for five bucks. They used him for trailin' Injuns. These Redskins are pretty foxy about hidin' their trails but a dog can smell 'em where yuh can't see no tracks. This dog is the best there is; he's a man-eater. See, they got him muzzled."

"And how come yuh got a valuable man-hunter like him for only five bucks?" Bert wanted to know, still not sure he wasn't dreaming.

"He bit a man," Wild Bill responded with elation. "He's vicious, I tell yuh. That's just the kind of dog we want. One which will get on the trail and if he catches up with a culprit he'll tear him limb from limb."

Bert shuddered and looked at the huge beast on the leash. It looked like a hound of some kind but the huge animal was almost hip high. "I don't believe he's a bloodhound. A bloodhound ain't that big and bloodhounds ain't vicious."

"Yore crazy," the Sheriff's eyes flashed fire. "That's why they call 'em bloodhounds—because when they smell blood they go wild like a wolf. All dogs is related to wolves."

"And yuh think he'll be a help in trailin' down outlaws?" Bert looked at the huge animal dubiously.

"If he'll trail Indians, he'll trail white men," Wild Bill opined. "Yuh'll have t'tame him down so yuh can handle him and we'll take him out and try him."

"Me?" Bert blurted.

"Yes, you," Wild Bill snapped. "Yuh've been bellyachin' about not havin' nothin' to do. Well, here's yore chance. Yuh claim t'be good with animals; let's see what yuh can do with this brute. Go out back and build him a big pen and build it high. It will be yore job t'feed him and tame him down so yuh can handle him. When Mr. Oklahoma Kid comes this way we'll be ready for him!"

Not relishing the prospects too much, but eager to have something to do, Bert did as he was bidden. He found the dog was almost dying with thirst and when he removed the muzzle and gave the dog water there seemed to be gratitude in the sad-eyed beast, who responded to his kindness with a wag of his tail. Bert put out a friendly hand to stroke the sleek head then hastily withdrew it. The hound answered his friendly gesture with bared fangs and an ugly growl, every hair bristling. "Listen here, Chowder," Bert said earnestly, "you and me gotta be friends. I've got t'look after yuh, feed yuh and give yuh water. We're goin' huntin' together one of these days."

"Why do yuh call him Chowder?" said a voice at Bert's elbow.

"Because he makes little pieces outa big fishes," Bert responded truculently, embarrassed at being interrupted at such a time. "Know anything about trainin' dogs?"

"A little," came the reply. "I got a way with animals. "Here, Chowder —come here boy!" To Bert's amazement the big beast leaped up and sprang toward the man with a friendly bark.

SURPRISED and fearful at these antics, Bert drew his gun to put a bullet through the dog's brain; but then he saw that the dog was delighted with this man and was trying to lick his face.

"Yuh see how it is?" He grinned in a friendly way at Bert. "Yuh gotta have courage and real friendliness. If yuh got any fear in yuh the dog can smell it. Yuh can't feel a dog with a keen nose like this hound. Come here now Mister and walk right up to him —Chowder, be good now and don't bite yore new master."

Bert approached the beast and stroked the sleek head. The dog's eyes became soft and gentle, adoring. "Why he likes me!" Bert blurted delightedly.

"Shore," grinned the other. "Once yuh win an animal's confidence yuh can do anything with it. Well, see yuh later."

"Say—wait a minute, who are you?"

But the fellow did not look back and Bert shook his head regretfully. "Seems like a nice feller. Don't remember seein' him before, though. Wonder who he is and where he works. Reckon he's just got a way with animals. I got a way with animals too. Here boy, here Chowder!" The dog moved slowly forward and wagged his tail. "And they say bloodhounds are vicious," he mused as he scratched the dog behind the ears. "Why I'll bet if he come on a wounded man he'd lay down beside him and lick his face! If the Sheriff could see this he'd bite off the end of his mustache! He thinks he's got a man eatin' hound!"

Wild Bill Herrick was a windy guy when he had too many drinks and his luck at poker was running high. He was a good hand at the game and felt that he was doing pretty well to be able to pay his expenses and buy drinks from what he "earned at poker." Since he had been telling what he was going to do instead of doing it and embarrassing questions were asked, he shifted the attention from himself by talking about his bloodhound.

"As soon as Bert gets so he can handle him we'll hit the trail. I won't even have to gun 'em down. Ol' Chow-

der'll chew 'em up!" It became the custom for every rider to go by and take a look at Wild Bill's man-eater. To everyone else but Bert, and possibly the stranger, the dog bared his fangs and growled viciously, the hair up and down his back standing on end, his eyes green with hate. Everyone agreed that he'd hate to have a dog like that after him.

Then one day a rancher found one of his cows hog-tied and a fresh branding fire near by. A running-iron was also found nearby but the would-be cattle-thieves had sloped out. In the rancher's opinion, and that of the Sheriff also, this would be a good time to try out Chowder and see if he would hunt them down and chew them up.

A half-dozen loafers went along to see the fun and for a while Chowder galloped along at a lively pace. After a while he jumped a jack rabbit and the chase was on. He ran the rabbit for two hours and finally rejoined the group, his tongue hanging out and evidently very tired. Bert encouraged him a while; but finally, to every one's disgust the dog laid down and wouldn't go another step forward.

"He's an Army Dog," the Sheriff explained lamely. "He's soljerin' on the job. What he needs is a smart Sargeant to keep him on his feet. Bert, when yuh get back t'town, write the Commander of Company D and find out who handled this brute. Maybe yuh can learn how to handle him if the feller that trained him told yuh how. Yuh might as well take him back with yuh. Me and the boys will go on out and see if we can run down these rustlers."

After a short rest, Chowder followed along after Bert who was discouraged at the results. "Reckon maybe we should fix it so yuh could ride," he told the dog. "Guess anyone who is used to the cavalry don't like walkin' eh, Ol' Boy?"

He wrote the letter Wild Bill had directed, hoping that he could get a better understanding of the hound. He also rigged up a pack saddle, padded it with a blanket and put it on an old gentle wranglin' horse. To his amazement the hound seemed to know exactly what to do and leaped to the horse's back with one bound.

"Why yuh lazy rascal!" he grinned. "Yuh been trained t'ride horse-back! I might have known there was a reason why yuh laid down on the job!"

●

AFTER THAT Chowder was more of an attraction than ever. Bert was like a circus performer and would make the horse gallop around and around the pen with the big dog sitting high just like a human. The dog seemed to have a wonderful sense of balance and could also hang on with his feet. Whoever had trained him had done a good job; but in Coyote Springs, Bert got all the credit. He spent a lot of time working with the dog, trying to learn what the dog knew and he almost forgot the letter he had written to Company D. He was so enthused about Chowder that every night before going to bed, Bert would go out and make a final inspection to see that the dog was alright.

One night he saw a shadowy form disappear into the darkness and he scratched the dog's ears. "What's the matter with yuh, Boy?" He had a resentful feeling akin to jealousy. "Who was that guy comin' up here and yuh don't make a fuss?"

The next trip out with the dog they had more luck. They made the dog ride to the scene of the crime and once Bert had Chowder on the trail they were hard put to it to keep up. There was an interchange of shots when they finally caught up to the man, and wounded and without ammunition the fugitive flung his gun away. A few minutes later a chance shot killed the horse and the man staggered away on foot. Chowder was seen on him and Bert saw at a glance what would happen. He heard the terrified shouts of the man as he went down, the dog on top of him. "See! What did I tell

yuh!" Wild Bill shouted. "Chew him up, Chowder! Chew him up!"

Bert shook out his rope and put spurs to his horse-shaking out his rope as he did so. He was just in time to prevent a horrible thing. His rope swished out and settled over the dog's head and shoulders, the horse braced himself and backed away to keep the rope tight. Chowder, growling furiously, was dragged away from the prostrate man.

"My God!" Bert looked at Wild Bill incredulously. "You'd stand by and let that brute tear a man to pieces!"

"Sure, why not?" Wild Bill snapped. "This job ain't one for softies. Once the word gets out that I got a dog that chews up hoss thieves and rustlers, maybe they'll stay clear of my county. I'll learn 'em!"

"Yeah," Bert flared angrily, "and you'll learn, too. For two bits I'd set that dog on you. Maybe yuh wouldn't be so happy about it if it was yore pants he was chewin' on!"

He grabbed Chowder roughly by the collar. "Mount!" He ordered harshly, and obediently the dog leaped to the pallet on which he rode. Bert stooped over the unconscious man, held a flask to his lips, then with tender fingers bound up the man's wounds. "Might have known there was somethin' wrong with that dog. The Army don't get rid of its animals unless there's a good reason. That dog is a man-killer!"

"Horses!" The Sheriff said contemptuously. "Ain't nothin' wrong with the dog, it's you. Yuh don't know how t'handle him that's all."

"I know how t'handle him all right," Bert made a gesture toward the gun at his hip. "One more stunt like this and I'll stop him permanent. I like the brute all right; but there's a limit —and just you try to stop me!"

•

BERT HEARD the shots that afternoon but he was undisturbed as he stayed around the Sheriff's office. It was not unusual for certain individuals such as Bull Henderson to go on a rampage once in a while just to see other men take cover. He would get drunk and start cursing wildly, tip over poker tables, knock men down and go berserk generally. Sensible men kept out of his way by crawling behind a bar or any other place where they could escape flying lead.

Bert had once suggested to Wild Bill that they lock him up for a spell and maybe that would cool him. "He don't mean no harm," Wild Bill shrugged. "No sense clutterin' up our jail with such as him."

"But he's plumb careless with where he throws his lead," Bert had persisted. "If he ain't stopped some innocent bystander will get hurt. If yuh want me to I'll side yuh and we'll take him in next time he gets wild."

Wild Bill bristled. "When I get ready to throw Bull in the clink I'll do it myself. I won't need any help!"

Bert had taken the easiest course and tried to quit wrestling with his conscience; but this afternoon he rather hoped that someone had called Bull's play. "Sooner or later," he mused, "some feller will come along who won't run. Bull will get his and it will be a good riddance."

He was in for a shock though when the Sheriff brought in the stranger who had tamed Chowder that first day.

"He just killed Bull Henderson," Wild Bill said nervously, his stringy mustache twitching up and down, his blue eyes dancing with excitement. "I'll teach him he can't murder the citizens of Coyote Springs and get away with it."

"Did yuh see him do it?" Bert pretended indifference. "If yuh're askin' me, it was a good riddance. Bull had it comin."

"No," Wild Bill admitted, "I didn't see it. I was out, but there was witnesses. We searched him and found some identification on him. His name is Redmon, Jack Redmon, and I've seen him around—altogether too se-

cretive t'suit me, comes and goes without no visible means of support. We'll have a court in a few days and hang this gent high and dry."

"If yuh rely on that bunch at the *Three Deuces,* you'll hang him all right," Bert responded with sarcasm, feeling intense sympathy for the prisoner who squirmed at the prodding of Wild Bill's gun. "That bunch would swear it was cold-blooded murder and hang this hombre just for the pleasure of seein' him kick. They're a bad bunch, Bill, and they'll get yuh, too, if if yuh don't quit gettin' so chummy with 'em."

"When I need yore advice about how t'do my duty," Wild Bill snapped as he shoved the prisoner into a cell, "I'll let yuh know!"

"It won't do yuh no good if yuh don't hurry up," Bert responded acidly. "Because, come spring, I think Ol' Man Barber will be buyin' back the Circle B. I got a letter from him yesterday, and I'm sick and tired of the way yuh run this office. I'm ashamed that I ever took the job!"

REDMON, if such was his name, had said nothing during this tart conversation between Wild Bill and his deputy but when Wild Bill had gone he looked at Bert and grinned. He was a nice genial-looking sort of fellow.

"Looks like you and your boss don't get along too well. I don't trust him somehow; but you look like the sort of fellow a man could ride the river with. You know as well as I do that Bull Henderson had it comin' to him and that I drew only in self defense."

"Yeah," Bert agreed worriedly; "I know and they'll hang yuh shore as shootin'. I wish there was a way."

"There is," Redmon said eagerly. "Yuh could get me a sledge hammer and a stone chisel or somethin' and give me a break."

Bert shook his head. "It just wouldn't do, Stranger. I'm sworn t'uphold the law. Yuh have my sympathy; but I guess you'll probably hang."

"And you'd stand by and see an innocent man hanged when yuh knew in yore own heart he was innocent?"

"That's for the court to determine," Bert wrestled with himself wondering which was the right way.

"Well," the stranger shrugged, "I'm not supposed to reveal my real identity but this looks like a time when I'll have to do it. Come over here and look at my identification card."

He handed Bert a card through the bars and Bert looked at it carefully. "It says yuh are Cal Coleman on special duty assignment. What's the assignment?"

"I'm supposed t'bring in Jack Redmon—otherwise known as the Oklahoma Kid. He killed an Army paymaster and got away with the Army Payroll. That's a Federal offense. They assigned me to the job because I look like Redmon. I'm supposed to impersonate him, get into the confidence of those who know him and track him down. You can see from that I wouldn't get involved with someone like Bull Henderson unless—"

"Okeh, Cal, I'll help yuh," Best responded decisively. "I can see from yore identification card that yuh shore are Cal Coleman. If yuh bring in the Oklahoma Kid that would be more than Wild Bill and I would do in a year. I'm about fed up with this job anyhow."

"When I bring him in," the prisoner responded gratefully, "I'll split the reward with you."

"Forget it," Bert said indifferently. "When yuh get loose, just forget yuh ever saw or heard of Coyote Springs —and as for my helpin' yuh, forget that if yuh don't forget anything else!"

●

WILD BILL came in late at night as usual but this time he was in high dudgeon. "Wake up, yuh lazy bum, and get Chowder on the trail. Our prisoner has broke outa jail."

Bert shook his head in pretended grogginess. "I—I musta been drugged; I was framed!"

"Well, hurry up then, and let's get a posse organized. Saddle our horses and let's move. Here's one time Chowder will earn his chew!"

Within an hour they were on the move, the dog baying weirdly across the prairie. "He's headin' for the Red Buttes," the Sheriff concluded. "Hey! Three or four of you fellas go on ahead and see if you can cut him off. The rest of us will stick to the trail. If he gets into the Bad Lands we might have to chase him for a week."

About two in the afternoon Chowder laid down. Wild Bill cursed and Bert urged him on but the dog was tired. They were in rough country now, weary and discouraged. All they had seen so far was a horse track. After a while they found the horse, lathered and exhausted. "He's in the bag now!" the Sheriff shouted. "He's afoot and he can't go far! Chew him up, Chowder, go get him boy!"

With a yelp Chowder was off again with a surprising burst of speed. Bert's heart sank as he visualized the huge dog mutilating the body of the prisoner. He urged his weary mount ahead in a frantic effort to save the man from a horrible death. It was no use. The dog soon outdistanced them in the rough rocks, his voice faded into silence and they saw him no more.

"It's no use, Bill," Bert shook his head wearily. "Fella probably got a fresh horse and killed the dog. We might as well give up."

"Not on yore life," Wild Bill bristled. "If he killed that dog I'll trail him down if it's the last thing I do." He sent two men back to Coyote Springs for supplies, preparing to comb every inch of the bad lands.

●

After three days Wild Bill was finally convinced that Bert was right and his resolve to continue had burned itself out under the scorching sun. They emerged from the Bad Lands and started across a stretch of desert. In the distance appeared a group of riders approaching. As they drew nearer Wild Bill stiffened in the saddle. "Say! They've got a dog with 'em and it looks like Chowder!"

Five minutes later they confronted Sheriff George Britten and his posse from Calder County.

"How'd yuh get that dog?" Wild Bill demanded.

"I brought him from a gent yesterday," Sheriff Britten responded impatiently. "What's it to yuh? I'm in a hurry so state yore business."

"It's my dog," Wild Bill said sullenly. "I want him back. He was stolen by a man who broke jail three nights ago."

"Fella sold him t'me was a nice feller," Sheriff Britten responded. "Even showed me how to put the dog on the trail. If yuh got a claim on the dog I'll pay yuh, I ain't got time to argue."

"Fifty bucks," Wild Bill demanded.

Without hesitation Sheriff Britten handed over the money. "Come on, boys, let's get a move on before that hound gets out of sight!"

●

About a week later Wild Bill entered the Sheriff's office with the mail, tossed Bert a letter, seated himself and buried his nose in a newspaper.

"Listen to this, Old Son," he interterrupted Bert in his reading. "Sheriff Britten brought in the remains of a man supposed to be the Oklahoma Kid. The Sheriff claimed that he knew positively the identity of the man whom he had been trailing for several days. In a gun-battle the man was wounded but managed to escape in rough country where the dog was able to make faster progress than the posse. Sheriff Britten is endeavoring to collect the reward for the outlaw; but the body was so chewed and

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GOLD EXCHANGE

By Harold F. Cruickshank

Paul heard the golden filly scream at the shot.

Paul Jordan wanted to give this superb wild filly to Mary Blair; he knew he could gentle the animal without harming it. But someone was determined he should not, and that someone was ready to kill the golden horse first!

PAUL JORDAN was thrilled as he rode his blaze-faced bay down the old elk trail through the timber. This was his first trip to the outside in months. Though only twenty-five, he was a veteran forest ranger. His father had been in the Forestry Service before him; Paul was born in the main Jordan peeled log house near the timberline of the towering Shosones.

He grinned as he turned and glanced back at his little roan pack

pony lallygagging alone, loath to leave the sweeter grass and brouse in the woods. Now the light was becoming stronger. Paul felt his heart thump in sharper tempo. He was going out for supplies, but a greater thrill to look forward to was another meeting with Mary Blair.

A frown now clouded his face, as he thought of Mary. Though the odds were against her being able to hold out alone at her inherited small spread near Pioneer Creek, she had expressed a stout determination to carry on. She had gently refused Paul's offer of marriage a year ago.

Paul inhaled a long breath as he struck the open and looked down on a sun-bathed, willow-fringed meadow. Suddenly, his bay snuffled, cocking his short ears sharply forward.

Paul's eyes widened as he watched a couple of long yearling wild horses break the buck brush, to rear and strike in mock-battle play. His attention was focused on but one of these creatures, a filly whose coat seemed to catch and play with the rising sunlight, tossing spun gold glints into nothingness in her capers.

Paul was amazed. Many times he had sat and watched the wild band of the great stallion, Tal, at their feeding or play, but never before had he seen this golden filly.

At once he associated the flashing light from her golden chestnut coat with similar lights which tossed every now and then from Mary Blair's hair, whose color, shade, or tint, Paul had never quite decided upon.

The young Forest Ranger had never interfered with the wild band of Tal. Never had he had any desire to trap a colt or filly, to add to his own string. They were creatures of the wild places and like the elk, the deer and the moose, he looked upon them as neighbors. It was part of his job to watch and report on the elk and deer, but the wild horse band was not listed among his charges.

Today, however, he became suddenly possessed with desire. Not in many years had he seen a more beautiful filly than this golden long yearling now biting and striking at a young, shaggy dun colt as they reared and capered, away from the main band.

The wind favored Paul; he had every opportunity to appraise the bloodline, the conformation of the filly. She was no happenstance member of Tal's wild band, but a creature of blooded lineage.

"Just misses bein' a true palomino," Paul told himself. "Mother must have strayed up into the hills and got killed... The wild band took over the orphan..."

The ranger shrugged, then suddenly his horse shied, almost piling him at the loud ringing crack of a rifle shot.

Two more shots followed in rapid succession.

Paul gasped as he heard the golden filly scream and go down to her knees. He reached quickly for his Winchester in its boot, but his hand froze on the stock. The filly had recovered and was tearing along his way. He saw her terror-filled eyes ablaze, her nostrils flared and blood red.

Now she swerved as she came to within a couple of rods of this man and his horses. Paul watched her plunge on to his backtrail into the timber.

Now he heard a new drum of hoofbeats and swung in the saddle to see a rider loping a handsome black colt across the meadow.

"Dave—Elton!" he gasped.

Another shock was in store, and Paul's recent dream crushed when he saw Mary Blair ride into the swale.

SHORTLY, Paul was nudging his bronc down to the flat.

Dave Elton, son of the biggest ranch owner in the entire country, greeted the ranger with a smirk. "Howdy, ranger!" he hailed. "On the prod early, ain't you? I fooled you this time, though. No elk!"

Paul winced. He had evidence a year ago that young Elton had killed

two young cow elk out of season, but had no witnesses; he could not lay a charge. Elton had bested him as, it seemed, he had bested him in the favor of Mary Blair.

Mary came up, radiantly lovely, her russet hair blowing wildly rampant in the early morning breeze.

Paul's heart skipped a beat and then went into a series of spins and loops. "Hola, ranger!" she called.

"How's, Mary! I was on my way out for supplies when the shooting stopped me."

He turned to Elton, scowling. "You don't mean to tell me you were trying to neck crease that gold filly!" he said coldly.

"That's right, Jordan..." Elton had booted his Winchester and was twisting a cigarette.

Paul turned to Mary, and shrugged. Her face crimsoned. He could see a change of lighting in her wide, hazel eyes. He was sure she would never have been a party to such a means of capturing a wild horse.

There was challenge in his gaze. Mary tossed her head back impatiently, and her pretty mouth curled. "Well, ranger," she said softly. "What's on your mind?"

He had no ready answer. He had planned calling on Mary, reaching her home yard at about noon. He was stung by her presence here with Dave Elton, for he was sure that the Elton, C-E Connected outfit were largely responsible for the difficulties her father had experienced trying to make a paying proposition of the Pioneer Creek spread.

Cass Elton, Dave's father, had slowly, but surely squeezed out most of the pioneer ranch settlers in the expansion of his own range and hayland. He had placed fences where actually no fences were required; and thus had closed off many a wild hay meadow or water source.

Yet, here was Mary in company with Elton who had no more scruples than to resort to an attempt to crease a creature as beautiful as the golden filly. Elton could have registered a hit, and killed the gold one...

PAUL QUIVERED with resentment. He turned to Elton. "There's nothing I can do to prevent you shooting up every member of Tal's wild band," he said coldly. "But," he went on, "I don't like anyone shooting anything but varmints on my land."

Both Mary and Dave Elton started, exchanging swift glances. Elton now swung to Paul. "*Your*—land?" he questioned. "You wouldn't try to fool me, would you, Ranger?"

Paul shook his head slowly. "I've been granted deed to a half section up close to my main home camp, and a tight fifty year lease to the adjoining range, which includes this territory!"

Mary Blair's firm round bosom heaved sharply. She crossed her gloved hands on the pommel of her saddle, and leaned forward as though expecting Paul to go on, but he had said his piece and was now gathering up his reins.

He turned again to Elton, and his mouth widened in a mirthless grin. "Surprised, huh?" he said. "Well, I didn't expect to be a ranger all my life, figured on settling down, raising a horse and cattle spread of my own. Sorry if I've broken up your picnic, folks... So long. I'll likely see you on my way out, Mary."

He was neck reining his saddler, when Mary arrested him. "Why not come to the dance at the new Cason barn?" she asked. "Matt Cason's giving me a twenty-first birthday party."

She cocked her head prettily on one side, and Paul smiled inwardly as he watched a scowl creep into Elton's face. "Okay, Mary... I'll be there," Paul said.

He turned abruptly away, still smarting from the experience of this meeting, yet fanning a lingering hope to flame in the spark Mary had given him—her invitation to the dance.

●

PAUL JORDAN was late getting to the Cason place, the night of the dance, Friday night. He had had to wait on a message from his headquarters, buy and pack his supplies.

The dance was in full swing as he unsaddled and corraled his horses, and moved toward the big, brand new barn. He felt awkward in a new store suit he had bought in town. It seemed to fit him as he imagined a straitjacket would.

Now at the open doorway, he paused. A caller was barking through the breakdown of a square dance.

"...meet y' honey, pass her by,
Wink at the next one on the sly,
Kiss that gal with the naughty eye..."

Paul started, as all partners swung out and he caught the flash of burnished copper, or gold, from Mary's hair, as Dave Elton swung her almost off her feet.

"Aleman left around the hall, an' promenade y' own for that is all..."

That was all. Paul watched Elton tuck Mary's arm under his and lead her to a far corner of the "hall."

Big, blustering Cason came up and wrung Paul's hand. "Look like you were goin' to a weddin', Paul," the gusty rancher bellowed. "But, son, you look good for sore eyes. Glad to see you ag'in..."

Cason drew in closer, and his voice became a husky whisper. "Best take over the little gold-headed gal soon, Paul. Dave's been drinkin' a heap. Mary ain't so happy as she tries to let on... Casper Elton's on the squeeze; he's after her Pioneer Crick land."

"But, she don't have to sell, Matt," Paul said sharply.

A faint, mirthless smile curled up Cason's mustached mouth. "You been out uh touch, boy. I had to take over one of Mary's recent notes at the bank. I did it to stop Elton grabbin' it. He's got her shut off from her best source uh drought time water."

"You mean he's fenced off Deer Lick springs, Matt?"

Matt Cason nodded and started chewing on his mustache.

Wild thoughts were percolating in Paul's mind. He shot a swift glance across at Mary now. Elton's face was close to hers; his dark eyes were wild, flashing in the lamplight.

Matt Cason had moved off, leaving Paul alone with his thoughts.

The young ranger seemed to have a fairly clear picture of Mary's situation. Dave was attempting to use his father's power as a means to breaking Mary down. To Paul it savored of the old melodramatic tale of the "mortgage" on the farm, the old Opera House thriller long since faded into the limbo of pioneer entertainment.

Suddenly his mind seemed to trip sharply. The master of ceremonies was calling couples up for a waltz.

Paul wanted Mary to himself for a few minutes. He strode quickly toward her and, anticipating his desire, she rose, and shortly, as the strains of the old Missouri Waltz faded in from the fiddle, and accompanying banjo, Paul guided the only girl he had ever loved across the floor.

"YOU LOOK lovelier than ever tonight, Mary," he said in a husky whisper.

Her wide sparkling eyes shot him a grateful glance. He felt the pressure of her fingers on his hand. "Thank you, Paul," she answered softly. "You look really handsome yourself, in spite of Dave's—"

She broke off, stabbing at her underlip.

Paul forced a cold smile. Dave Elton was rigged in an expensive western outfit, of tight whipcord pants, flamboyant silk shirt, and colorful neckerchief. "I feel like a city slicker, Mary," he said with a soft chuckle. "But I just couldn't resist getting this store suit outfit, for a change. But, Mary..."

"Yes, Paul..."

"I'd like to see you alone a moment.

Could we go outside, just sort of fade out for a minute or two? I—"

He felt her hand go suddenly slack in his. His heart became dull and heavy, then Mary looked up swiftly, nodding. "Now, guide me toward the doorway," she whispered.

Dave Elton and his partner, a buxom Swedish girl, one of the help at the Cason ranch house, went by. Elton's face was drawn into a dark frown which furrowed and ridged his forehead as he glared at Jordan.

Now Paul reversed, and glided, and in another moment or so he was leading Mary to a rustic seat under the wide low limbs of a pair of handsome cottonwoods.

A half moon flooded the yard. Paul turned to Mary and touched her near hand.

She was ravishingly lovely in the moonlight. He started to talk, but his voice seemed cloyed in his throat. "What is it, Paul?" she asked. "Something bothering you?"

Paul was slow with his answer, but now his courage returned. He was afraid to talk, yet this fear prodded him to action. "Yes, Mary," he said huskily. "You bother me. That is, I'm —well, I don't like the way things are going for you. Your good friend Matt Cason tipped me off to what's going on. I—"

"Was that what you brought me out here, for, Paul?" Mary interrupted. She withdrew her hand from his and started to rise, but Paul caught gently at her arm, and pressed her back again.

"Just a minute, Mary," he urged. "I—well, you know how I've felt for some time now, even before you left Pioneer Creek country to go to school. I've loved you, and you only—always. Will you—uh—marry me, Mary darling: now, almost right away?"

Mary Blair was stirred, but, Paul knew, she was very independent, determined. The Pioneer Creek place was the home of her parents, the pioneer home they had carved out by sweat and privation. It was now her inheritance, and her heritage.

"It's—it's kind of you, Paul, to want to help," she answered, but her voice seemed to lack the warmth Paul had hoped for.

"It isn't that I—well, Mary." Paul stumbled. "It's because I want you, regardless, no matter what. I want to marry you; want you to come up to my place, the prettiest spot in all Wyoming. Together we could start a new spread, build up—well, I figure we'd be very happy."

Paul turned in. He watched the bosom of Mary's frock rise and fall, watched her downcast face, and the flutter of her eyelids.

This was his moment. He gathered her to him, and crushed her mouth with his... Her attitude had given him encouragement, and he held her closely for long moments until a coarse voice sounded thickly from behind the cottonwoods.

"Dirty, sneakin' two-timin' curly wolf!"

Mary pressed herself from Paul's embrace and gasped as Dave Elton reeled out to face them. One of the tophands of the C-E Connected followed closely.

Mary rose. She tossed her head back impatiently.

"There's nothing sneaking about a man taking the woman he loves out into the moonlight to propose marriage, Dave," she said with cold deliberation.

Elton chuckled thickly. "I don't agree, Mary," he said. "Jordan's been a burr under my saddle for years. I heard all he had to say to you."

Paul got to his feet. He felt uncomfortable in his tightly-fitting suit. "Just what's in your craw, Elton?" he asked.

"Just—this!"

It was an untelegraphed blow, a looping right hand which caught Jordan off guard, a terrific blow behind his left ear which sent him crashing over the rustic seat.

Instantly, Elton was in, and Paul Jordan knew he had the fight of his life on his hands...

PAUL DIVED, as a boot belted him to the ribs. He rolled in behind the seat, breathing hard, but he recovered, and shucked his tight coat, side-stepping another bull rush by Elton as he did so.

Mary Blair cried out. She appealed to Paul, but Jordan ignored her. This was no time for truces, for niceties of behavior in the presence of a lady... Elton had tripped the venom he'd developed in his mind against Jordan for some time.

He had also tipped his hand; he had eavesdropped and had heard what Paul had said to Mary about her precarious situation at Pioneer Creek.

He came in flaming mad, as Paul spun, and slipped a swinging left hand which, had it connected, would have gone far to tearing Paul's head from his neck.

Elton overshot. Paul spun. He felt Mary's hand on his arm, but he flung it off, and rushed, to smash a terrific straight right flush to Dave's mouth.

The young rancher scion tottered back. Paul flung all rules to the night wind, and followed up, hooking the tottering man under the chin with the heel of a boot. "That's—to payoff for—bootin'—my ribs," he called out hoarsely.

"Now—" he went on, "come and get it! Get it clean if you like, but anyway..."

The C-E Connected ranch hand helped Elton to a recovery.

Paul warned this ranny about his interference. "Best stay to one side, waddy," he said coldly, "or mebbeso you'll be in for something..."

There was a heavy murmur of voices.

Led by Matt Cason, men were crowding up the clearing under the cottonwoods. Cason spoke sharply to Paul, as the ranger stepped in, but Paul ignored him.

Cason's voice sounds, however, had distracted Paul. Elton was quick to seize on this opportunity. He thundered in, head down. He caught Paul in the chest, rocking him back.

As he struck ground, Paul's head hit sharply. For a few split moments his brain was dulled—until he felt the hammering, ruthless blows to his face, and a thumb start working on his left eye.

Paul Jordan was in superb physical condition. There was no single trace of alcohol to dull his brain; he hadn't even had a beer in town. Now he rolled his head, stabbed up with the heel of a hand, which rocked Elton's head back.

One of Elton's knees was hurting him. Paul twisted, then flung his body over, bridging tightly.

With a mighty heave he flung his opponent from him, rolled and scrambled, staggering to his feet. He shook his head and backed away a step or two, as he blinked his hurt eye.

Now he saw Elton, a blur at first, and then clearly. He stepped in, feinted his left, then smashed an overhand right squarely to the young rancher's jaw.

Elton folded, and Paul rushed in.

As he stooped to heave up Elton in a crotch and underarm hold, Paul heard a sharp cry from Mary, but he could not be stopped now... He spun his opponent, sending him crashing into a wild pin-cherry thicket backing the cottonwoods—the place from which Dave Elton had eavesdropped.

Slowly Paul turned. He was blowing sharply, batting an injured eye, clenching and unclenching bruised hands. He started when his good eye glimpsed the flashing light of disdain in Mary Blair's eyes. She tossed her head and walked abruptly away.

MATT CASON drew up and clamped a hand on Paul's shoulder. "I ain't sayin' the young hellion didn't have it comin' to him," he said gruffly. "But, Paul boy, you made a mistake. Times, womenfolk like to see men fight for them, but

this was neither the time nor the place... Mary's twenty-first birthday party. Remember?"

Jordan winced and nodded. "Yeah. Guess I was a mite hasty, Matt, but don't forget he started it, right in front of Mary. I just couldn't take it setting, so—well..."

Paul paused a moment, then went on: "Reckon she wouldn't want to talk to me, Matt, but please tell her I'm right sorry it had to happen, but also tell her I hate a sneakin' kiote who'll hide in the thicket, listenin' in... I'll be saddling up and riding on, now, Matt... Thanks for your interest."

Matt and Jordan shook hands, then Paul turned to walk to the corral, to saddle and pack.

Shortly, he was riding into the moonlit north west, his bruised hands crossed on the pommel—a lonely man who felt that his greatest hope in life had been stomped out.

●

The following morning, Paul was astir early. The sun hadn't risen high enough to bathe the small clearing of his home yard, an area of some four acres in which were set his stable, a small tack room and utility equipment building, and his corrals.

Instinctively as he reached the outside, he cocked his head, and sniffed sharply. He was searching for any possible trace of smoke. It was his job. Shortly, he would be riding his patrol in the high country.

Suddenly his blaze-faced bay snuffled. Paul froze at an answering nicker from the underbrush off right. Slowly, the ranger turned, then gasped, for peering at him, her lovely big eyes wide with mixed lights of concern and appeal, stood the golden filly.

Instantly his former desire for possession of this beautiful filly returned, but Paul's mouth tightened. He had thought of her as a gift for Mary—a gift of gold.

Now, his desire was rekindled by thoughts of Elton, who, too, had shown that he wanted this handsome little orphan. "Just hang around a spell, kitten," Paul whispered softly. "No harm'll come to you. I'm just going to make sure Elton never dabs his loop on you."

As he moved on toward the corral, Paul heard a crashing of brush at his back, and knew the alarm was on.

A slow smile gathered his mouth corners up. He was satisfied that the filly would return. No harm had befallen her in her closeness to this man creature and his horses...

●

LATER, AS he rode the high shelves, from which, through his glasses, he conned the glorious wild country below, he sighed—sighed with a longing. It was a longing to bring Mary Blair up here, to let her see for herself not only the magnificence of the folding brush-and-timber-studded rangeland below, but also to note the possibilities for its development into a ranching area second to none in all north western Wyoming.

Paul sighed as he turned away, to make a stiff climb, to a higher point of vantage. He was glad rain had fallen recently. There was no trace of smoke, save at one small spot in the panorama. This was burning moss in a swamp, but not a threat, as Paul and a crew had dug, slashed and then ploughed out an adequate, confining fireguard.

Suddenly he halted. He had reached a narrow moss-and-grass-grown plateau shelf fringed by delicate small scrub growth. He saw a nanny goat with a pair of twin younglings punching her, gently nibbling the dew-laded browse.

It was as pretty a sight as anyone would want to witness, Paul told himself.

He turned slowly, to make his survey. Satisfied that all was well, and knowing that other rangers, in their

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respective territory, would be equally alert, he moved silently away, leaving the wild creatures to their feeding. Seldom, save when short of fresh meat, did Paul kill a sheep, or a young buck.

He had, however, no qualms about tromping out the predatory carnivores, the wolves, coyotes, mountains lion which creatures often killed more than they required for their immediate needs...

As he rode down to the lowland, later, he was still thinking of the predators and could not disassociate a thought of such men as Dave Elton whom he had seen threaten the life of the beautiful wild, golden filly.

Thoughts of Elton stirred him. It wasn't likely that the handsome, proud young rancher would take his recent whipping calmly. He was not the type to forget. He had packed a grudge against Paul Jordan since their early schoolhouse days. This had intensified with the return of Mary Blair to Pioneer Creek.

As his sure-footed bay gelding made his way down from the cragland heights and Paul approached his own land, he felt a sudden twinge of despair, of frustration.

He had associated Mary with all the beauty of his wild acres. In his planning for future ranching up here, he had included Mary—his fondest dream.

He felt a twinge of guilt as he recalled Matt Cason's charge: "...You made a mistake... This was neither the time nor the, place... Mary's twenty-first birthday party...."

Alone Jordan acknowledged his mistake. No matter what the circumstance, he should have refrained from bodily contact with Elton, on that night, in the presence of the girl he loved.

Yet, out of it all, came one consoling thought: Mary had seen, she had heard; she had seen Dave Elton precipitate the fight by his ruthless, sneak attack...and Jordan wondered

[Turn To Page 88]

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if, had he taken that blow, turned the other cheek, Mary might not have felt a sense of repugnance.

Paul shrugged. He was without understanding. Mary Blair was the only girl he had ever associated with: the only girl he had ever loved, and Mary, he knew, had a mind of her own, as evidenced in her determination to carry on at Pioneer Creek, in the face of odds that were dead against her hope of success.

•

DAYS AND nights slipped swiftly by. Paul had plenty to occupy himself. Rains came and gave him time to start his clearing. His first cultivated acres would be sown to alfalfa. That would be next spring.

He took time out to hunt along the old elks' trails, silently stealing through coverts, always alert for the wild cry of Tal, the big stallion chieftan of the horse band.

Paul was not interested in Tal, save that the stallion's cries, buglings, might give him location of the gold filly.

Today, Paul had skillfully set a corral trap back at his home yard. His little pack cayuse was tethered in the trap, with plenty of good sweet grass, and water...

Suddenly, the young ranger was startled by the ringing bugle of Tal. Paul froze. Again and again that strident call sounded. Slowly, Paul pushed through a wild fruit thicket, let himself down to a lower level and shortly, from cover, he saw them—the wild band of Tal. They were feeding contently in a small lush swale, while their magnificent chieftain stood on guard on a height of land above.

Paul focused his glasses and swept the herd. His heart beat sharply, for the golden filly was not with the band. He made a wide circle of the band, and hunted for sign, tracks, or sight of the golden one, but saw no such sign.

GOLD EXCHANGE

He smiled when he jumped a doe muledeer and her twin fawns. They were a pretty sight as now and then he glimpsed their black tails flagging as they jumped windfalls and low scrub brush.

Now he turned for home. The sun was westering, bathing valley land and high timbered, and rocky peaks in madly splashed baths of rose and gold, mauve and purple...

He was almost a quarter of a mile away from his home clearing when he heard sounds that both startled him and thrilled him.

Came the unmistakable shrill scream of a trapped wild horse!

Paul licked his parched mouth, gripped his Winchester more firmly, and broke into a lope along the narrow game trail.

Now, sifting through a wild cherry covert he came to a halt, his eyes wide, his lower jaw sagged as he saw through the corral poles, the rearing form of the sun-splashed golden filly.

Paul moved toward the corral slowly. His little pack pony quivered with fear as the wild filly, her flanks dripping soapy flecks of lather, whirled and lunged, reared and struck as she cried out in her terror.

The ranger watched her for long moments, his lips framing words which he did not utter. "More beautiful than I'd imagined!" he declared at last, "But as fiery as a rodeo hellion."

He moved in closer and the lovely long-maned creature whirled back, shaking her head savagely. "Shake it easy, kitten," Jordan called softly. "You'll come to no harm. Just steady down, now, an' eat a bait."

Though in the same corral as the pack pony, the filly was separated by a trip gate ingeniously devised by Jordan. He moved cautiously around, and led his cayuse out to an adjoining yard.

UNTIL THE sun had dipped behind the far peaks, Jordan stayed close beside the trap corral. Every now and then his heart pounded furi-

[Turn Page]

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ously. He was thinking of Mary Blair.

Jordan seemed to visualize Mary here, at some future date—here in the saddle on the golden filly, her own hair vieing for honors with the gold lights from the filly's coat.

"Gold—exchange," Paul breathed.

But then—there would have to be more gold—a plain band of it on the third finger of Mary's left hand.

The ranger shrugged off a shudder, and turned away to make his supper. . . . Off in the distance, there sounded the wild penetrating calls of Tal. It was as though the great one had discovered the absence of the golden member of his band and was calling—calling her back.

Night closed down on the beautiful wilderness. Jordan went about his chores with silent tread. Every now and then he heard wild snorts issuing from the trap corral. But he smiled. The filly had ceased her wilder rearing, plunging, lashing.

"Matter of—time," the man breathed. "Just a matter of time an'—uh—gentle handlin'. . . ."

Three weeks of intensely hot weather followed.

Paul Jordan was hard pressed, for the fire hazard had become alarming again. He found time only now and then to give an hour or so to the taming of the high-spirited little wildling filly. But, she was gentling.

This morning he watched her, tossing her head as she tried to dislodge a headstall he had rigged for her.

Paul smiled, for she gentled down at his approach and after snorting contemptuously, responded to his softly spoken voice sounds. He had placed her in a corral with one of his little pack ponies for company.

Shortly, the ranger was watching the pair at play. The golden filly knew no limit of energy as she reared, whirled and bit or struck, but seldom did she hurt her companion.

[Turn To Page 92]

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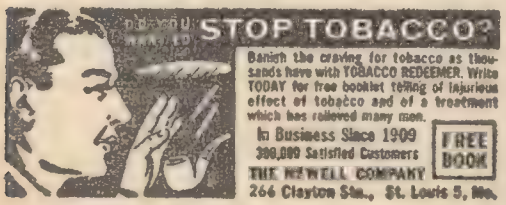
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Paul's eyes shone. Next year, in the spring, he would begin to think of saddling the gold one, and with this thought came a burning thought of Mary Blair. He hadn't seen her since the unhappy night of the dance and fight.

Twice, though, he had glimpsed Dave Elton in his home range area... He concluded that Elton and a companion rider could have been combing the wild breaks for mavericks.

Suddenly the filly reared and whirled, snorting wildly.

The ranger spun. A north-easterly wind was blowing and on it came the dread tang of smoke.

Instantly Jordan whirled away to saddle his bay. He was riding hard along a game trail, his heart thumping sharply. A fire, now, would indeed be disastrous. Not only would it threaten valuable timber, but with this wind could wipe out all Jordan's home area, buildings and all.

HE RODE feverishly for nearly an hour, and then swinging in along a plateau shelf, he found the source of the smoke tang.

It was coiling, black smoke—swamp smoke. It fanned out in a fog that screened a wide area of brushland.

Jordan coughed as he pushed his horse along, and then was forced to call a halt, and hitch the bay.

Shortly, having swung around to the north east of the swamp, his eyes suddenly widened. He was amazed, for the fire was confined to the swamp proper. There was no danger. "A man-made job!" he told himself sharply.

He gripped his axe firmly and pushed through tangled underbrush and windfall timber, coming to a halt as he found newly slashed and piled brush and tinder dry rubble, and then discovered the cause of most of the smoke—swampy sod and moss and swale grass.

Jordan quivered with anger. This was a poor sort of practical joke. He was still pondering this when he heard a stir at his back.

[Turn To Page 94]

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Again his brows arched, as he glimpsed Mary Blair pull her black mare to a skidded halt in the clear.

"Mary!" Paul lunged toward her, stumbling through a tangled labyrinth of fallen lodgepole pine.

"Paul! I—I just had to come."

Breathing sharply, Jordan strode up and laid a hand on the pommel of Mary's saddle. "You—*had*—to come up!" he said. "I don't sabe, Mary. What d'you mean?"

"It's Dave. He's been drinking a lot. Ever since the fight, he's been ugly, especially since I had to refuse his offer of marriage."

Paul's heart lunged from a new cause now."

"You knew he was coming up here—to set off this fake bush fire?" he asked softly.

"Yes... Tim Dolan, the old C-E Connected wrangler, told me, Paul. But that isn't all. This planted fire is a ruse—to get you away from the homeyard. Dave's after the—the—"

"Filly!"

His eyes blazed sharply into Mary's. She started. "Y-es, Paul. He's known for some time that you had her. He—"

"Ride around with the wind, honey," Paul cut in. "I'm going to get my horse. See me later at my place, huh?"

●

JORDAN picked up tracks—the heavy tracks of Elton's colt, and the lighter tracks of the filly.

He smiled as he found evidence of the golden filly's capers, torn up turf, where she had lunged back on her lead rope.

Jordan saw the evidence that he had an advantage over Elton and knew that shortly he would fetch up with the would-be rustler.

Many things were revealed to the young ranger as he now rode in behind the cover of a fringe of brush along a hogback ridge... He was riding around, with the wind in his

favor, hoping to circle and cut in ahead of Elton, without giving the wild filly his scent.

Paul was sure that Elton had tried unsuccessfully to win over Mary Blair, by a possible offer to dissuade his father from his ruthless attempt to squeeze out the Pioneer Creek hay and water altogether. Failing this, Dave had taken to drinking, and his old hatred of Jordan had given him a spite complex.

"Childish, in a way," Paul told himself. "He must know, in his sober moments, stealin' this filly wouldn't break me, nor help him any with Mary who already knew I had captured the filly..."

His horse tossed its head and blew sharply.

Paul pulled him up. They had cut brush, and before them, revealed at rest in a small valley bowl was Elton, the black colt, and the snubbed down filly.

Paul swung his bay, cut into deeper brush and shortly, catching Elton down drinking at a small trickling creek, he thundered in, dismounting flying.

Dave Elton rolled. His hand swept down to the butt of his gun.

Paul was startled; he hadn't expected Elton would resort to his six-gun.

Paul dived for a shallow ditch, at an old, overgrown beaver dam, and whipped out his own gun as a shot blasted, singing over his head. He began to crawl, flat to the ground. His heart beat fiercely when he heard the lunging of the startled golden filly.

Now he reached a cul-de-sac, and wormed his way through a screening of brush beside a larger beaver dam.

Peering ahead, he saw Dave Elton hunkered down, his head darting this way and that.

Jordan had the advantage. He wormed his way along, on the far side of the dam, and now slowly rose. A dry twig cracked. Elton wheeled,

[Turn Page]

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snap shooting in the general direction of the sound.

His bullet was wide, and Jordan threw down and pulled. There was a wild yell from Elton as his smashed gun spilled from his fingers.

"Hold everything, Elton," Paul sang out. "Glad I didn't have to gut-shoot you, or muss you up too much. Now start for your colt. Quiet him down, so I can take over my gold filly."

When Elton hesitated, Jordan strode toward him. He had hurt the young rancher's right hand, but not badly.

He was in close now. Elton's cheek muscles were twitching sharply, his red-rimmed eyes flashing. Suddenly, he leaped to one side, then as quickly in, head down, but Jordan was alert. He side-stepped, and swung his looping left hand smashing to the other's jaw. Elton went down, spread-eagling on the grass...

[Turn To Page 98]

BLOODHOUND ON THE TRAIL

[Continued From Page 78]

mangled by the dog that positive identification has so far been impossible. The dog, a cross between a bloodhound, a wolf and some primitive blood-thirsty monster, was formerly owned by Wild Bill Herrick, Sheriff of Coyote County."

Bert was stupefied into silence as the horrible truth struck him with stunning impact. He knew beyond a doubt who the man was who had been sent out by the Army to bring in the Oklahoma Kid. He went to the door, tore up the letter into tiny pieces and watched the wind carry them away; but the words which he had read were indellibly etched on his mind.

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 [Continued From Page 96]

WITHIN fifteen minutes Dave was being prodded on toward the restive horses. Paul Jordan whistled and called softly to the filly. She tossed her head wildly, at first, bearing back on her snubbing rope.

First Paul snatched Elton's Winchester from its scabbard, emptied it and tossed it into the brush. Now he moved in and slowly unhitched the lead rope. He turned and whistled up his bay saddler and dabbed the lead rope around the horn.

Now he turned to Elton, who still nursed his bruised right hand and a cut mouth. "Get riding, Elton," Paul ordered coldly. "Don't come back. Go some place an' sober up... If we should have to meet ag'in, I hope it'll be peaceful. But, if you get salty ag'in with me, I'll—"

He took a threatening step forward, but halted, smiling coldly, mirthlessly, his eyes like two small units of molten steel.

Shrugging, he turned away, mounted, and started off. There was a chance Elton could retrieve his rifle and shells and bushwhack him, but Paul was sure he wouldn't...

●

Mary Blair rose from a seat on Jordan's peeled log stoop and came to meet him, but she startled the filly.

"Wait a moment till I get her corraled, Mary," Paul called out.

Shortly they stood and watched, wide-eyed, as the beautiful wilding minced in and started to nuzzle her companion pack pony. Sharp flashes of gold darted from her coat.

Paul turned to Mary. Her flaming hair gave out its dazzling, burnished lights. "It's pure gold today, Mary, honey," the young ranger said huskily. "As gold as the—uh—filly's coat. I—"

"Paul—darling!" Mary's reserve was completely conquered.

Paul took her into his arms, crushing her as he hungrily devoured the full warmth of her mouth.

A few minutes later, as he held her at arms' length, he turned a sly glance toward the filly, and then back to Mary's ravishingly glorious hair. "She's yours, honey," he said softly. "All yours, to keep and—uh—"

"Yes, Paul," Mary prompted in a husky whisper.

"I—I'm sure I'm getting the better of the—uh—exchange."

"Exchange, Paul?"

"That's right, kitten—the gold—exchange."

Mary flung her arms about his neck and held him fiercely while in the near by corral the gold filly snuffled softly.

●

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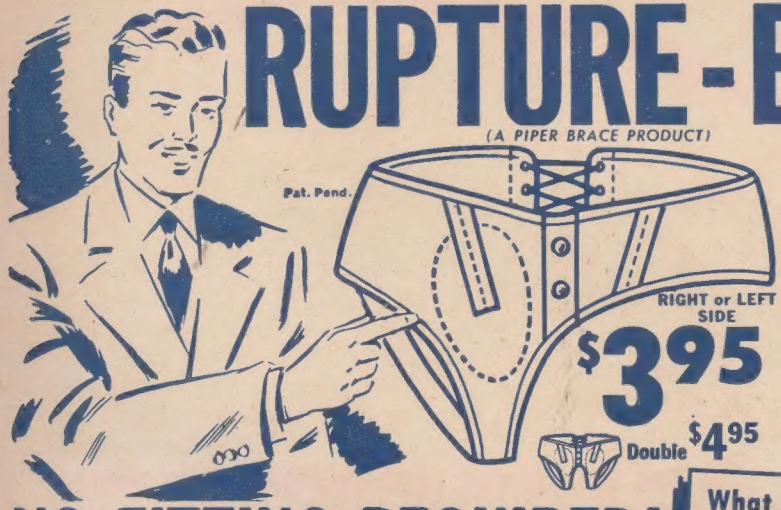

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